LITTLE NOVELS OF FAMOUS CITIES

The Angels of Messer Ercole



Duffield Osborne

COLL U. M.
ART IN FICTION

X-mas greetings
from L. F. A.

Dec. 1907.

THE ANGELS OF MESSER ERCOLE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE LION'S BROOD
THE SPELL OF ASHTAROTH
THE SECRET OF THE CRATER
ETC.


Louis Mora

THE ANGELS
OF
MESSER ERCOLE

A TALE OF PERUGIA

BY

DUFFIELD OSBORNE

WITH A FRONTISPIECE BY
F. LUIS MORA
AND ILLUSTRATIONS FROM
PHOTOGRAPHS

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TO

THE MARCHESA ISABELLA GUGLIELMI

WITH PLEASANT MEMORIES

OF THE HOSPITALITY

OF

ISOLA MAGGIORE

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THE ANGELS OF MESSER ERCOLE

I

IN THE SALA DEL CAMBIO

HE was a slender boy, hardly above middle height, and singularly beautiful: the face was one that would have brought joy to eyes that watched the cameo grow from the onyx, and the little red cap, set jauntily on one side of the shock of brown hair, lent an air of mingled impertinence and mischief to its wearer. A black velvet doublet slashed with cherry, together with parti-colored hose of cherry and black, set off his graceful figure. All the others wore gowns of some

cheap stuff, but he claimed that it was absurd to expect one to paint beautiful things when one's own appearance was not at its best. As for the age of this jackanapes, a glance at him, as he pirouetted about the scaffolding in the Sala del Cambio, might have led you to guess it at seventeen or eighteen years; but, on the other hand, surely "The Perugian" would never permit a mere boy to touch brush to the noble fresco that was to be his masterpiece. Therefore it seemed quite certain that the would-be artist must have seen twenty summers at the very least.

"Beware, my Bernardino!" he cried out to one of his companions.



Frescoes by Perugino in the Collegio del Cambio (Prudence and Justice, with Fabius Maximus, Socrates, Numa Pompilius, Camillus, Pittacus, and Trajan)

"Do you not know the cost of ultramarine, and that the Master will starve you for a week if you feed that robe so bountifully?"

"There is yet enough to feed your robe also, Ercole," retorted the other. "Hold you him for me, Raffaello, while I touch the cherry slashes in his doublet. If his coat be black and blue, it may do penance for his skin."

Then there was a fine scampering about the scaffolds, encouraged by bursts of mirth from those who watched the chase, until it ended by the fugitive making a flying leap from the platform on one side of the hall to that on the other — ten feet at the least — whereat the pursuers

halted in surprise, and the rest made the roof ring with their "bravoes."

Suddenly an awed silence fell upon the young men; for "The Perugian" himself, with two of the leading merchant of the corporation, had entered, unperceived during the excitement, and now stood gazing up in amazement and white with anger at the way his pupils were using their time and his.

An instant, and Master Ercole had sprung down to the floor, and stood, cap in hand, before Messer Pietro Vannucci, with an expression at once shamefaced, deprecating, and comical.

"Is it thou playing the zany again?" exclaimed Vannucci at last.



Frescoes by Perugino in the Collegio del Cambio (Fortitude and Temperance, with Lucius Sicinius, Leonidas, Horatius Cocles, Scipio, Pericles, and Cincinnatus)

Ercole bowed low, until his very abasement seemed to contain something of mockery, as he replied:

"Of a truth, and wisely, my Master; in that, having been detected, and awaiting punishment, I may be in the better spirit to depict for you your mask of 'Fortitude' — should you trust me so far."

The rest of the pupils shrank within themselves at their comrade's temerity, and their wonder knew no bounds when, after a short pause, during which the eyes of the great painter wandered from the unruly assistant to his morning's work on the fresco, he answered with none of his customary irascibility. Perhaps the boy's beauty appealed to

the artist's eye ; perhaps some touch in the painting mollified him, or, perhaps yet again, there had been a substantial payment that day from the worthy signors of the corporation. Whatever of these or else it might be, "The Perugian" answered mildly :

"It is well for pupils when they learn it is none of theirs to employ other than their master's thoughts on their master's work. Not that I would seek to trammel Raffaello, or to deny that thou, Ercole, shouldst use intelligently the skill I have taught thee. Only remember that the spirit as well as the composing is mine : which brings me to a subject concerning which I would speak with

thee — a portrait, the robe whereof I shall entrust to thy brush for a day."

He paused, and Ercole still listened, cap in hand and with a more respectful manner that fitted him oddly. The others busied themselves ostentatiously about their work, each with one eye and one ear for the speaker; while the two citizens seemed absorbed in felicitating each other upon the beauty of the frescoes.

"The Perugian" spoke again, addressing his patrons.

"Ah, signors, how shall I express my joy at the words you utter, which tell me that you do not regret your generosity, and which bid me look

for promptness in the payments that are to fall due! Believe me, then, it is with the greater sorrow I beg of you to excuse my further attendance to-day. I must see to a commission —"

The younger of the merchants smiled; but the other, a sharp, shrewdfaced man of perhaps fifty years, frowned slightly and shook his head.

"Have a care, Pietro Vannucci," he said, "lest eagerness for gain tempt you to essay too much, and lest all our commissions suffer thereby. Truly, we had looked to your explaining the whole design to us on this visit."

A curious expression, part pride,

part humility, and part malice, rested on the face of Vannucci.

"Why, surely, Messer Dominico, I shall be pleased to wait upon you until nightfall. Harken now, Ercole; run to the noble Prince Gianpaolo and tell him I will obey his summons at such time as the worthy Signor Dominico Baldeschi will permit."

The face of the merchant grew pale, and his jaw dropped. Then, as Ercole turned toward the door, he seemed to recover his self-control.

"A jest—a jest, my good Pietro!" he cried, running forward and placing a detaining hand on Ercole's shoulder. "Your master, my young man, is pleased to amuse

himself — as if I did not sufficiently love and revere the good Prince Gianpaolo Baglioni, to whom may God give long life and honor! Surely, gentle Pietro, you will attend upon the house of our noble protectors before you so much as squander a thought on us, their servants."

"I will indeed do so, if you really desire it," said Vannucci. "Come, Ercole; your cloak; farewell, signors. It is Raffaello Santi who will speak with you of the design."

He had turned and passed out of the door, but Baldeschi followed and brought his mouth close to the painter's ear.

"And you will not mention my heedless words to his Magnificence,



Portrait of Perugino, painted by himself

my good Pietro — you that know my devotion to him, and how, had I dreamed it was he that waited, I would sooner have cut out my tongue than spoken of detention or delay?"

Vannucci laughed.

"No; if you wish it, I will not mention how unreasonable you were — only remember, Dominico Baldeschi, that he who seeks to control Pietro Vannucci Perugino must be prepared to run counter to the will of princes."

Crestfallen, the merchant slunk back, mumbling thanks that must have tasted like imprecations in his mouth, while "The Perugian" and Ercole pursued their way down the Via di Città. The head of the great

master had sunk upon his bosom and he was discoursing aloud, but as if to himself:

"Thou art a good youth, Ercole — a youth of promise, and I look that thou shalt paint wonderful things when I am dead. I have only one better, and him I foresee that we shall lose. It is thou, Ercole, who hast never so much as squinted toward Buonarotti and his follies — his sensuous, violent gods — sensuous, not pure like those of the fathers and the good Fra Angelico, now a saint in Heaven, of whom I have told you so often. Only yesterday this Raffaello of mine had the impudence to tell me that he saw much in the Chiusan.

Malediction! *He* to see against my eyes — a kitten whose eyes have not yet opened to the light of art! Look thou, Ercole, beware of those who would tempt thee with dainty dishes. They are fair to the look and taste — that I deny not — but they shall not nourish the soul, and it is death that must follow their partaking. Yes — thou paintest well. It is thou shalt do the robe. But canst thou also overcome thy nature so far as to be discreet — to add thirty years to those now thine?" He stopped short and, turning, faced his companion.

Ercole looked drolly serious. "Have I not kept silent since you began speech with the Signor Baldeschi?"

"Truly, yes; and it is much for thee," said "The Perugian," smiling. "Therefore thou shalt paint the Princess Ottavia's robe."

He had turned again as he spoke, and was descending one of the narrow streets that branched off to the right.

"Thou hast not seen her," he went on; "for she is come now to Perugia for the first time, having spent the seventeen years of her young life at Spello."

"The Princess Ottavia Baglioni!" exclaimed Ercole, and his eyes shone. "I have heard of her."

"Yes; it is the beautiful lady of Spello herself, the daughter of the high and mighty lord, Gianpaolo,

and one whom it behooves silly boys to look aside from. Mark you, it is the robe thou art to paint — not the face. The portrait is for a wedding-gift to her uncle, the Lord Astorre, in honor of whose approaching nuptials she is come to our city."

II

"THE PERUGIAN" MENDS UNWISE PLANS WITH WISE COUNSEL

THEY had reached a small piazza that lay between the gates of San Carlo and Eburnea, and before them rose a cluster of lofty buildings, above whose doors were carven in threefold cognizance the Perugian griffin, the Guelphic lion, and the azure with golden bar of the Baglioni. An aged servitor, with griffin's head embroidered upon his doublet, answered the artist's summons, and, with a gesture of recognition, threw open the door. Then, casting a hasty but searching glance at the pupil, he turned and hobbled away.

"I will announce your coming," he said.

"Once again, madcap, let me warn thee, no tricks!" whispered Vannucci, impressively, when they were left alone. "The Baglioni brook no liberties. A single indiscreet word might be thy ruin and mine," and he glanced around at the walls of the court.

"Do not fear for me, Master," said Ercole. "I can run and leap like a goat, and Raffaello and I sleep in the attic of the second house from this. It would be rare sport to escape all the swords of Baglioni; still I forego the pleasure: — for your sake, my Master, I will not speak to the lady

of the love I already bear her, though the unspoken word suffocate me; no, and I will not so much as kiss the tip of her little finger — for which, who knows? she may not commend your caution"; and he thrust his cap far over on one side of his shock of curls, and strutted around the enclosure, while Vannucci compressed his lips to restrain his agitation and tried with warning gestures to check the flow of words.

Ercole skipped up close to him.

"Ah, my Master; *you* are no minister of state or ambassador, like the wise Messer Nicolo Machiavelli of the Florentines. If you

cried out to me to be silent, only the spies at the lower windows might hear it, but when you shake your fist and put your finger to your lip every crevice that looks upon the court must perceive that I am talking treasons. See, now, here comes old Cerberus. I am dumb. Soon I will be blind if you will have it so."

Annoyed, indignant, terrified, but powerless to change his plans at this hour, Vannucci followed his conductor, and Ercole came after, uninvited, ignored, and with a look of mock humility upon his face.

Up several carved stairways, through long halls, until at last they paused before a curtained doorway,

opened for them at that moment by a woman older even and more decrepit than the porter.

"It is the Lady Ottavia? Ah, how lovely she is!" whispered Ercole in his master's ear; then, seeing that the great painter was really frightened at his indiscretions, and being also interested in the appearance of the young princess he was about to see, he held his peace and resumed his expression of lugubrious gravity. A step forward and they came upon a pretty picture indeed: a girl leaning far over the arm of a great Gothic chair in which she had perched herself, and striving to rescue a small volume from the tender mercies of an

angry spaniel, who seemed to regard it as a rival for his mistress's favor. Her back was toward them, as she peered down behind the chair, but the poise of readiness to pounce upon the abductor, should he venture out from his refuge beneath, showed the lines of her form in all the charm of slender and girlish grace. A cloud of hair, half loosed from its net of pearls and golden with the purest tint of the Etruscan refiners, floated across her neck and cheek, while the broad sleeve of a blue gown, through whose slashes the white of her satin vest seemed ready to burst, trailed almost to the floor in her eagerness to effect a capture or a rescue.

A footfall — a sudden intuition — a whisper of Messer Cupid's — who knows? warned the lady of the presence of strangers. Like a flash she sat upright; dignity, become almost forbidding in her consciousness of its former lack, drew her face into lines whereat one hardly knew whether to be frightened or amused. The gown and golden hair were still sadly tumbled, and the spaniel growled beneath the chair and worried the hated volume. Vannucci and the duenna had bowed their heads in grave deference, oblivious of all but the duty owed to rank and the blindness owed to its relaxations. Ercole stood bolt-upright and gazed spellbound. He

had, indeed, snatched his cap from his head, then he had dropped it on the floor and clasped his hands in utter unconsciousness of the fervor of his gaze. Neither of his companions noted his attitude, so intent were they on convincing the young lady that they had observed nothing of dog or book or theft or ambuscade; but she had let her eyes, golden also like her hair, wander lightly from these two, and now they rested thoughtfully on the younger man. Gradually the look of prim dignity melted away and her cheeks took on a shade of rose; the tremulous forerunners of a smile crept into the corners of her mouth; then she grew white and blushed again. At last

she spoke, to Vannucci, but with eyes still fixed on Ercole, to whose ears her voice came as from the lute of Heaven.

"You must pardon me, Messer Pietro, that I have not received you with more fitting ceremoniousness. Monna Cecca will tell you; it is all Amanto's fault: he is a very wicked dog, and it was my uncle, the Lord Troilo, who gave me the beautiful book of Messer Petrarca."

Vannucci and the old woman were bowing low again and mumbling protests that all proper ceremony had been observed and that the mere delight of gazing on the beauty of the Princess Ottavia was enough to make one blind to any default,

had such existed. Suddenly they were conscious of a quick movement. Like the stoop of a falcon, Ercole had darted upon the revengeful Amanto, who was taking advantage of the seeming diversion in his favor to sneak away unobserved and enjoy the sonnets of Messer Petrarca in appropriate seclusion: there was a momentary scuffle, an indignant snarl, and the rescuer knelt on one knee before the Gothic armchair, holding out the wounded but still living volume, while the baffled culprit danced about in a frenzy of rage, but at a safe distance, and made the walls ring with his indignation.

The old woman gazed, shocked and speechless, while the great

painter's anxiety was not unmodified by a consciousness that, as a composition, the picture was more than charming. As for the lady, she was now full mistress of the situation, and her smile added new beauty to her voice.

"And who is my brave knight who rescues the gentle poet from the teeth of the wicked dragon?"

Vannucci hastened to answer, fearful of what reply his pupil might make:

"It is one of my young men, who, by your noble father's permission, and with that of your Magnificence, will paint the folds of the robe in the portrait your beauty has set upon my poor canvas: Messer

Ercole da Passigno, a good youth and clever, though country-bred and prone to heedless indiscretions, which I pray your Noble Magnificence may pardon for the sake of the love, devotion, and reverence I bear your house."

"Truly, Messer Pietro, it has seemed to me that his breeding is of the best, and if his skill but equals it, he shall surely paint the robe." She had taken the book from his hand and was regarding Ercole with an odd little expression, as he stood before her with bowed head, a model for all the discreet virtues. "Yes, truly, he appears excellently well bred."

The last words were uttered almost

in the manner of an unconscious soliloquy, and they were followed by a pause. Vannucci perceived that the time had come to take his departure, and yet he felt the necessity of one more word of warning in Ercole's ear — a dread of what mad escapade might result upon his choice of an assistant, which he had now come to look upon as an act of consummate folly. "Ah, if he had but brought Bernardino Betti or Giovanni di Pietro! The devil was in the impulse that had moved him to this!"

Thus pondering, but with a smile that disclosed nothing of his troubles, "The Perugian" bowed low.

"And now," he said, "if your

Magnificence will permit me to withdraw, my pupil will do his work, after I shall have whispered him a word concerning the colors."

She bowed rather stiffly, and, while the duenna bustled around, Vannucci placed his hand upon Ercole's shoulder and drew him back.

"Once more, by all the saints, hold yourself well. A foolish jest means ruin. Daggers set loosely in their sheaths in this house."

"Trust me, my Master; it shall be as you wish," said Ercole, slowly.

Never before had "The Perugian" noted in his pupil such seriousness of face and speech, and, inconsistently but humanly enough, it disturbed

him the more. The die was cast, however; Ercole must take his chances; and Vannucci, as he descended the staircases and passed out into the street, found consolation in reflecting that, even at the worst, his own case would not be desperate. Should offence be given, the Baglioni would doubtless glut their vengeance on the first offender; and then, too, he, the master-painter, was a man of too much value and credit to the city to be visited very heavily for what was at worst but an error of judgment.

III

MESSER ERCOLE PAINTS A ROBE

ERCOLE set himself to the task of mixing his colors and arranging his palette. Then he aided Monna Cecca to wheel out the easel bearing the picture, and stood spellbound before it, gazing on the perfect beauty that "The Perugian" had transplanted upon his canvas: an inspiration from Heaven: the loveliness of the sweetest saints, the splendor of the most glorious angels! Hardly conscious of what he did, he began to paint, glancing quickly from the robe to the picture and back again to the robe. She had taken the graceful pose that the portrait set, and though he had not let his eyes

wander to her face, he knew that hers were resting upon him — felt them in every heart-beat, in every pulsation of the blood that seemed to leap through his veins. A robe? What was a robe to paint! — a jealous thing eager to cover greater beauties than its own. How arrogantly that fold sought to assert itself! — a mere wrinkle — stiffness without grace; and, ah! to dream of the perfect lines of the shoulder from which it hung! He was painting now with a furious energy, and yet it was only his mind's eye with which he saw — dimly, as in a dream. He was conscious that old Monna Cecca had been babbling gossip — nonsense — wise precepts

— what did it matter? They were only strings of words, and the voice cackled; but in the ears of his dream were divine harmonies — cytheras and lutes and heavenly voices, such as warbled from the angels in a picture he had once seen, and which his master had said was painted by a holy friar who dwelt near Florence: a painter to whom God sent the most glorious of his household that men might know of their beauty. Was there not an angel before him now? — and yet he dared not look at her. Why not? If the good Fra Angelico had been of so timid a mould, God would doubtless not have favored him. A laugh, low like the ripple

of a mountain brook, broke in upon his ecstasy.

"See, Monna Cecca; is my robe truly of the blue I bade you tire me in? It is blue as the sea unto my eyes also, but our good Messer Ercole is a painter, and his brush proclaims me clad in cloth of gold."

Rudely awakened from his reveries, Ercole gazed blankly from the portrait to the model. When had he mixed the gold upon his palette? — or had he done it at all? — yet truly all that he had painted was golden like her hair; and the blue strokes with which his master had sketched in the garment she wore had wellnigh vanished, or showed but as a shadowy iridescence.

The effect was strange, unearthly, beautiful.

He was looking into her eyes at last — eyes brimming over with the laughter that curled the corners of her mouth; and a new madness came to his brain and drove out that which had been its tenant. She was not one of God's angels, after all. She was a Princess of the house of Baglioni; a mortal like himself, fashioned to love and be loved. What should prevent him seizing her in his arms — up to the roof! — out and over — down into the attic he shared with Raffaello? — and whither then? Ah yes; then he and his friend would hold the stair against all the bravoes in

Perugia; and, having won, they would be lords of the city.

The harsh cackle of Monna Cecca broke in upon his dream.

"What basketful of follies is this? you little imp-of-nothing-at-all! Is it to obtain the punishment of an old woman that your master's pupil plies his art? and here I have been speaking wise and prudent things! and under my very eyes—ah! how shall this day's work end for me?—out!—out!—"

Ercole sat still under this tirade, like one newly awakened, but the Lady Ottavia spoke soothingly, having banished the laughter from her mouth and eyes:

"Nay, be wise, mother, with

your own wisdom, and do not send the young man away because he has fallen into a very pardonable error. See, rather, how necessary it is that he should correct it — lest others find it thus and wonder."

Without more ado, and as if the matter were settled once for all, she resumed her pose; only her eyes met Ercole's for a moment and saw in them gratitude and a strange new word as well — a word that had never come to her before, but which she saw now, and, seeing, knew that she had known it well long before sight or hearing or thought had dwelt with her. Then she blushed and looked down, and Ercole mixed his colors anew and fell furiously

to work, while Monna Cecca grumbled and shook her head and at last grew silent.

Suddenly her mistress addressed her, as if in an outburst of thoughts that the long silence had bred:

"Truly, good Monna Cecca, I have decided that I will not wed the Malatesta."

The duenna's eyes grew round despite their wrinkles and their lids drooping with age. Ercole's heart gave a great leap in his bosom.

"But your father — the gentle lord, Gianpaolo — ?" gasped the old woman.

"My father loves and will never compel me," pursued the girl, with a pretty air of decision that matched

well with her lineage. "The Baglioni do not drive easily, and I have decided that the Malatesta is an evil man — and that there is another I love better."

She was looking far away, out through the window, as she spoke. Monna Cecca, old and withered as she was, seemed struggling with an apoplexy. Ercole had shot one glance at the Princess's averted face and felt that it was consciously averted. Then his eyes dropped to his palette and he strove to collect his thoughts. A noise at the door interrupted the new silence that had fallen upon the group. A man stood there, looking from one to the other with piercing eyes deeply set

in a face that was stern, cold, haughty, and yet strangely beautiful. His tall, slender figure, dressed in black velvet relieved by slashes of red satin, added to the impression of a personality that the artist would glory in and the prudent man take good care to stand well with, or, better yet, stand far from: — a human tiger or leopard — beautiful, strong, relentless. Ercole was no coward, but he knew, for a brief moment, all the power of terror. Surely every thought, every dream, must be legible to those sombre eyes. What then? Well, he would be stabbed. Many men had died thus, and why should he fear? The pain was trifling,



Pulpit in the Duomo

and he had confessed to old Fra Geronimo at the Duomo only two days ago, since when he could hardly have accumulated a very long stay in Purgatory. Thus, rendered more serene by an analytical consideration of the worst outcome of his peril, and by the consciousness that now was the time to show forth his noble blood before the most lovely eyes in Perugia, he rose, palette in hand, and made an obeisance so profound as to be almost ironical. Monna Cecca was mumbling her beads behind her skirt, and even the Lady Ottavia wore a pallor on her cheeks that her smiling greeting could not quite cover.

"It is most gracious in you, sweet father, to come unannounced. What think you of my portrait?"

Though the Lord Gianpaolo seemed to smile, yet it changed scarce a line of his inscrutable face, as, turning slowly from Ercole's to his daughter's greeting, he moved forward with a step half gliding and full of power — still the great cat in every action — and stood pondering before the easel. There was silence for a moment.

"It is indeed yourself, my Ottavia," he said at last. "When I have said that, I have said all. It is very beautiful." Then to Ercole: "Young sir, my steward will give you a purse for your master and

a largess for yourself as you go out." There was no change in his manner or voice, but Ercole felt a little shudder pass through him.

"Your Magnificence is satisfied?" he said; "and yet," with a dash of his old boldness, "I had it in purpose to help the robe still more."

"I am satisfied. I have said that the portrait of my daughter is perfect. For me, then, it is also finished — and for you."

There was cold steel in the tones now, and it pierced like the point of a rapier. Still the face had not changed, except that the speaker stood at full gaze.

Again bowing, to take the thrust with a better grace, Ercole replied :

"The words of your Most Noble Magnificence bring me a joy and an honor that only my master's will surpass."

Gianpaolo smiled grimly as he watched the young man gathering together the tools of his art.

"I have permission to retire?" said Ercole.

Gianpaolo inclined his head very slightly ; and then the recklessness of Ercole's nature asserted itself, and he looked long and earnestly at the Princess with a look that no man or woman could fail to read. The crimson surged to her face and

neck. He bowed and was gone, while a half-formed frown on her father's brow drooped down to mingle with the odd smile that curled his lip.

IV

RAFFAELLO SEES WITH BOTH EYES

As the student descended the marble stairways, he was not without a full consciousness of his peril. He had, indeed, dared to beard the fiercest and most madly reckless of all the Baglioni, and in his own palace, where a nod might sheath a score of poniards in a man's body: he had bearded him in a quarter where the nobles of his house were most proudly sensitive, and in a manner as emphatic to the subtle Italian mind as was a curse or a blow to men of the Northern races. Thus far he was safe, but could he hope to pass the court and gate? What signals might already have been

given from the window? And yet the new-born love of this girl sent the blood bounding through his veins in reckless exultation. Not for worlds would he quicken his pace — nay, under ordinary circumstances he would doubtless have leaped down the steps three at a time, but now he schooled himself to the stately carriage of some Venetian doge upon the Stairway of the Giants. Then the court came into view, and he strolled out upon the pavement, humming a Lombard love-song. Now was the time to die! Surely he could never again face death so gayly or in such a knightly cause, — for the Lady Ottavia Baglioni, for the love-god

himself who had shaped her to be his high priestess unto the lovers and loves of all times!

The court lay listless, empty but for two or three servants busy cleaning armor, and the hideous old porter nodded sleepily at his post. Ercole crossed it, walking lightly, but with nothing of haste, and, a moment later, turned into the little piazza. His own door was but a few steps up towards the Via di Città, and he entered, careless whether watchful eyes had traced him, and mounted the many flights that led to the attic he shared with his fellow-pupil, Raffaello Santi, whom "The Perugian" had often named to become the greatest painter of them all.



PORTRAIT OF RAFFAELO, PAINTED BY HIMSELF

No jealousy had ever found harbor in Ercole's heart, and, as Raffaello sprang up from the chest that did service also as his bed, they greeted each other like brothers. Then the latter's quick eye caught a new expression in his companion's face, and, holding him off at arm's-length, he studied him closely for a moment.

"Now, my Ercole; now I could paint you as no master shall ever do in times to come. Pity you are not a grand signor now. What has happened? Tell me truly, *mio caro*, for you are to-day indeed great and noble and beautiful — a hero — a man — that was but yesterday only a harebrained youth like the rest of us. You are

happy, too — yet you are also troubled."

And then Ercole seated himself upon the chest and, while the other continued to study his face, he burst out with his tale of the day. It was the artist that spoke and the artist that listened, and these artists were at once boys and men : boys in the hot flush of spirit and passion ; men in strength and intellect, in courage and chicane.

Raffaello sat silent when his friend had finished. At last he said :

"She is worth dying for, my Ercole?"

"A thousand times — for a glance."

"Then, truly, it seems to me that

it will be much wiser to live for her."

He laughed softly, and Ercole smiled.

"My skin is whole yet, if my heart be indeed pierced through," he said. "I shall not offer my throat to their swords; still, the Baglioni are not to be defied with safety — by such as we."

"Ah! *mio caro*," exclaimed Raffaello, and he looked upward with a rapt expression, as if gazing upon some beautiful spectacle — "ah! you should have seen the gentle lord, Astorre, on the day when the Oddi came back to Perugia with Giulio Cesare degli Ermanni and Agamemnone della Penna and Troilo

Savelli and Nicolo di Sforza! It is five years now. They burst into the gate with a great company of exiles and hired bravoes, shouting each the name of some gallant house. One by one they had torn loose the chains that barred the streets against men-at-arms — up to the Piazza del Duomo — until the bronze lion and griffin trembled and wellnigh fell from their marble brackets on the palazzo. Then sallied out the Lord Simonetto, unmailed, and assailed them, fending or taking their blows, until the Lord Astorre was armed and rode forth and bade his cousin go tend the twenty-two wounds he had received. Ah! you should have seen Astorre



PALAZZO PUBLICO SHOWING THE LION AND GRIFFIN

ride into the press, cutting, thrusting, leaping over the fallen men and horses, invulnerable, terrible, while the griffin's head flashed upon his helmet, and his eyes and sword streamed fire. Then it was I swore that if ever the saints favored me to be a painter, I would paint me a San Giorgio that should be the noble lord, Astorre Baglioni, whom I shall ever see. May San Lorenzo and San Ercolano grant me the fulfilment of my vow!"

"He slew them? — they fled?" questioned Ercole, his face burning with animation, though the tale was no new one in Perugia.

"Yes, he slew many, and then his people gathered to the rescue;

stooping, swift and fierce, like a beautiful brood of falcons. Believe me, there were but few of the Oddi that fled."

"Well done, Baglioni!" cried Ercole.

Then they sat still and looked at each other, remembering that it was these same falcons whose claws Ercole da Passigno must elude.

Raffaello spoke again.

"Do they know where we live?"

Ercole spread out his hands.

"I cannot say. They could have spied on me as I entered."

Raffaello pondered. Then he took his cloak and short sword.

"I go to seek our master," he said. "Surely he will help us."



The San Giorgio of Raffaello

Ercole looked doubtful.

"How many ducats would he lose if the Baglioni cut his throat for harboring me?" he asked, smiling.

"They will take care not to cut his throat, and he will take care to get his ducats," laughed Raffaello. "Though a throat more or less be nothing to the Baglioni, would not the whole of Italy name them barbarians if they slew 'The Perugian'? Lie close till I return."

He was gone, and Ercole threw himself upon his couch to close his eyes and feast them with the face of Ottavia.

Swords and daggers were nothing to him now; was he not in her

presence? telling her of his love? watching the delicate blush that mantled brow and cheek and neck? Malediction! Why must Gianpaolo's bravoes come so quickly? He rubbed his eyes and sat up, rueful, but somewhat consoled by what was at least a new reprieve.

"It is well," Raffaello was saying. "I have seen the Master. He is angry, but will help you. He *must* — for the sake of your father if for no other reason. Listen, now. You are to stay here. If they be searching for you, escape from the town would be hopeless — with a guard at every gate. I mentioned his taking you into his own house for a few days, but he fell at once into



The Tribunal in the Collegio del Cambio

an ague, protesting that spies would surely be stationed there, and that the nearest place to the falcon's nest would be the safest. You are to work no more in the Sala del Cambio; visitors are too frequent; nevertheless he thinks it better that you work, and he will set you at the Assumption in the convent of San Severo, in a room which none enters but a few monks, and you are to slip in before daybreak and slip out after nightfall. That will throw them off, if they seek you at the Collegio."

"And here? if they saw me enter?" said Ercole, wrinkling his brow.

"You must take your chances

of that. Only, if they come, not having found you at the frescoes, it will be most like in daytime, when you are away. At night, there will be chances — over the house-tops. At all happenings it is the best we can do. You cannot fly: no one will give harbor to a hare that the Baglioni are coursing, and you will be in a safe place o' days. Besides, your surest safeguard is the *festa* that begins to-morrow: pageants, jousts, banquets, balls to celebrate these approaching nuptials. Therefore, most of all, after the saints, are you to bless Astorre Baglioni and Lavinia degli Orsini."

"They shall have six wax candles — each — if they save me," said



The Church of San Ercolano

Ercole; and then they looked at each other and laughed at the thought of a Saint Astorre. "But to the sweet Madonna I vow a triptych when I am famous: Herself and our Lord shall look from the middle panel, with Saints Lorenzo and Ercolano on the one side and Constantius and Ludovico di Tolosa on the other — this if She give me her."

Raffaello's mouth fell open. "You cling to your folly?" he gasped. "If the Master dreamed it, he would take you in his own hand to the Lord Gianpaolo."

"And still — before *him* even — I would cling to it," exclaimed Ercole, hotly. "I would love but once as I can die but once, and it

would be decorous they should fall together. Truly, my friend, I was laughing when you spoke of my escaping from Perugia — trying to imagine myself flying from the city where she dwells. It is the dear Mother of God who shall aid me, Raffaello, if it be Her will that I live."

Raffaello shook his head doubtfully, but he smiled, saying,

"Well, so be it, then; but you will be cautious and wary?"

"Assuredly; for my very love's sake," said Ercole. "Now I am sleepy. In a few moments I shall see her and speak with her, Raffaello — in a country where coward caution and the pride of princes cannot enter."

Then followed days and weeks of feasting, dancing, and chivalric games through all Perugia; festivities the grandeurs whereof Raffaello related to his friend in the night. As for Ercole, every morning he crawled down from his attic, and, having peered cautiously out of the doorway into the dusky street, scurried away through the gloom; under triumphal arches bearing the united escutcheons of Baglioni and Orsini, that loomed up in the gray mist and yawned for the pageants of the day; past palaces and houses hung with garlands — far over to the convent of San Severo, where a young monk always opened the little postern for his coming, as the warder

of some sanctuary might receive a fugitive who sought its shelter. After nightfall it was the same course back, only more dangerous, because the streets were thronged with belated revellers, — peasants from the country-side come to gape at the spectacles, retainers of the great houses eager to drink and bully and make love and pick quarrels. Among all these Ercole threaded his way each night, pausing near his lodgings until the coast seemed clear, and then darting under the archway and into the blackness of the hall and stairs.

V

THE LADY OTTAVIA WILLS

"AH! but my little bird of Spello sang sweetest of them all to-night."

It was Monna Cecca that spoke, while her old fingers, trembling but still dexterous, were busy with the lacings of Ottavia's gown.

"No lady from Rome, or from Naples — no, not even the proud new Princess herself — but was a bat's face to my Pretty; aye, and the setting was well studied to show the jewel. It is old Monna Cecca that ever prays the good saints to teach her the feathers that best clothe her little bird, so she may win praise ever and the love of some brave gentleman who rides

with his hundred lances — strong and cunning as the wicked Duke Cesare, but gentle and true as the good Lord Jesus — "

Ottavia's laugh was doubting, indulgent, kindly, and a little bitter withal. She shook her hair free from its net of pearls till it flowed down over the loosened vest.

"I do not want him, mother, and why should he want me? Dream of this gentle youth that is to be my husband dwelling with us here in Perugia! Can you not see my sweet cousin Simonetto stab him some morning, that he may prove by how much the art of our good Vannucci surpasses that of Messer

Leonardo of Florence — a dainty dispute, truly!"

"But the Malatesta — "

"I *hate* the Malatesta. No, I have decided that I shall marry a poet or — or a painter, such as the pretty youth whom Messer Pietro brought to paint my robe" — and she peeped out from under her hair at the old woman who had grown pale through the brown parchment of her skin and whose fingers trembled more than was their wont.

"A bold, ill-bred varlet!" she muttered; but Ottavia had sprung up with flashing eyes.

"What do you say?" she cried. "Know, then, for your slanders, he is noble and brave and beautiful

and I shall marry him and — and — I love him."

The fires of anger were dying before the flood of tears that rose close to quench them, her lip trembled, and the nurse, who had tottered back from the outburst, drew near again and took the girl, shaking now with suppressed sobs, in her arms.

"There, there, sweet one," she crooned. "It is old Monna Cecca shall nestle her pretty bird; but surely she knows that her gracious father will not brook such thoughts. The youth is a pretty boy, but it is not such an one as he that is for the daughter of the Baglioni."

"Did you not see," whispered

Ottavia, "how bravely he looked at me while my father stood at gaze? — and, oh! Monna Cecca, have they killed him for it? Do not say they have killed him!" and she burst into a tempest of weeping.

"No, no; to be sure they have not killed him," mumbled the old woman, scarce knowing the words her lips formed. "Why should they kill him? It is those they fear or who have the things they desire whom the falcons rend. He is but a poor student to whom your race would not deign to bend for vengeance, more than will you, their daughter, incline for this foolish love of which you prattle."

"Where is he, mother, if he be not dead?"

"Saints! child! and how should Monna Cecca know of that?"

"Oh! then he is indeed dead, and you will not tell it, and I shall die too, like La Giulietta. They say there was never a lack of poison and daggers in this house, and surely a very little will serve for me."

"Listen now to the foolish one!" cried the old woman; "and she will kill herself for a sprig of a boy who has doubtless each day looked love with his bold black eyes at a score of peasant girls and tradesmen's daughters. They are all one to such as he."

"Then it is I that will kill him," said Ottavia, softly.

"*Dio mio!*" ejaculated the old woman. "But aye, that would be better —"

"Ah, but he is not looking at city maids; and no, I would not kill him. I would think of him no more. I *will* think of him no more, mother, if you let me but see him once again — only once. Who knows better than you that we of the Baglioni do not throw ourselves lightly to any man? He seemed a pretty youth, but, when I see him again, I do not doubt I shall detect an hundred faults, so that if you humor a little whim you shall save me from a great sorrow — and from death."

The words had burst forth as a flood, and Monna Cecca stood dazed, with open mouth, while the girl clung to her and kissed her. Then she gasped:

"Saints! What manner of madness is all this? It is yourself that your father would slay then, and for poor Monna Cecca there would not be enough racks in all Italy to tear her old joints apart. Is this maidenliness?"

She tried to look stern, stroking the girl's head.

"Surely it is, mother, for I swear to you that I will not so much as speak to him: that he shall not know it is I. It is only to see he is alive and to teach myself that he

is nothing to me. Is not that wise? And we shall arrange it — oh! so cunningly — shall we not? And it will be rare sport, and I shall be happy, and you, too, because I am, and perhaps I shall marry the Malatesta after all — eh?"

She paused again to take breath, and Monna Cecca, with half-closed eyes, was nodding her head slowly.

"Swear to me," she said at last, "that you will not speak and that he shall not know you if I contrive it. Oh! but this is folly and vain words!"

"Yes, truly, and also I will swear that I shall not kill myself. I will not *swear* that I will marry the Malatesta for them, but perhaps —

who knows? — and all will be easy to plan, for you who are wise. Go now, mother, and in the morning I will be ready. Go, for I feel sleep coming to me and, to please you, I will try to dream of — the Malatesta."

VI

MONNA CECCA AND SANDRO CONSULT

SCARCE knowing how, the old woman found herself in the passage with the girl's kiss still warm upon her forehead. She took a few steps, shaking her head from side to side.

"Ah! what folly — what folly!" she muttered; "and does the pretty fool count that I will lend myself to such madness, even supposing I could discover the whereabouts of this crazy painter's boy? Not but I could though, perhaps. What is seventy years if one does not have cunning, and who knows, after all, if it would not be the best medicine; and if he suspect not her presence, perhaps we can help him

break the spell. Yes, yes! And what if, being thwarted, she should kill herself? They strike quickly, these Baglioni, and they think later."

Nodding, she went slowly down the passage, down the stairs, and out into the court. The night's revel was over, but here and there a bravo or scullion sprawled across a stone step or in a shadow, wherever the last fumes of the cup had reached his brain. It was with a purpose that she seemed to peer into several faces. Then she laughed.

"Not here! Folly of me to dream it. Sandro would not be as he is, were he like to these grunting skins of wine."

Still mumbling, she crossed the court and mounted a narrow winding staircase in another part of the building; up, up, clutching the rail and panting, till she stood before a little door near the roof and rapped gently. "Yes, yes! It is I can contrive it if it be contrivable."

The door opened after a moment's pause, but only on a crack, and a man peered cautiously out, holding a lighted candle with his left hand above and behind his head.

"Wise, always wise," laughed Monna Cecca, softly, "and with your dagger low down in your right hand. Do you think an old woman seeks your life?"

"There have been such who have," muttered the man, with a short sigh of relief, and letting the door swing open as he recognized his visitor.

"That is because you know so much, Messer Sandro," cackled she.

"Yes, that is because I know so much," he said, knitting his brows.

He was a dark man, slender and of middle height, dressed plainly in hose and doublet of brown. An open book lay on the narrow couch from which he had risen hastily and where, as the streaks of fresh candle grease on a small table at its head showed, he had been reading when Monna Cecca knocked.

"And a student, too," she half sneered.

"Yes, and a student, too, if maybe," he said slowly. "You stand close to those that are high, mother. What do you wish?"

"To make you richer than you are. Do you want money?"

He laughed. "If it be enough to balance the risk. No one comes to Sandro unless it be to ask him to take risk."

"And yet it is safer to play the spy for His Magnificence than to use the dagger."

"That's as may happen," he said shortly. "What do you want?"

Monna Cecca drew a long breath.

"Did you chance to take note

of a slip of a youth who came here ten days gone with Messer Pietro Vannucci?"

"Aye; to do work on the portrait of Her Magnificence, so that Messer Pietro might add more to his coffers with less labor? Aye, aye, and whence he came and whither he went," and he nodded several times grimly.

"He lives — yet?" faltered the visitor.

"Aye, lives and paints — yet."

"Listen now," said she. "It is someone's wish that I and another see him."

The man looked puzzled and suspicious. "Let someone bid me as much then," he said.

"He cannot bid you that," she whispered, "— for reasons. But you shall have twenty ducats to prove it is his riches and power that pay the price — not I, a poor old woman; and you shall not so much as lisp even to your master that you do his will."

Sandro laughed softly again. "What devil's game is this?" he said sharply. "Not a step will I move — no, not for an hundred ducats — till I see that it be not treason of some sort. I am the Baglioni's man and they use me, hardly enough the saints know; but I am their man. Do you see, old one?"

"Yes, yes, I see, and also that you are a fool; but the saints

forbid I should balk you in your folly! You shall know all, and then it will be in your power to have my old bones broken if you wish. Mark, I tell it you against my orders — against my orders."

"All one to me, so I see my way."

"Well then, master spy," and she leaned forward, "there was one came to you that day, when the boy went forth, and bade you keep him within the circle of your eyes — eh?"

"And well?"

"But you knew not why and you know not, and it was not designed you should; but *I* know because I am old and wise and the Baglioni trust *me*."

"To betray their trust?"

"When it be necessary to carry out their will through fools, as now."

The man shifted uneasily, but his face was dogged and the look of suspicion still clouded it.

"Therefore you, too, shall know why," she went on, after a short pause. "It is a lady that the young Lord Simonetto dreams of, and she cast her eyes upon the painter boy's curls and his black eyes and his slim grace, as he went to and from our chambers, and the Lord Simonetto, learning quickly of the glances that flew between them, and imagining there was more to it than appeared —"

"Would have run him through ere he passed the gate," sneered the other.

"Not so, good Messer Sandro," she went on; "but, being wiser than you and knowing that such a thing were either needless an his suspicions were false, or the end of his hope an they were true, he had another bid you to learn about the youth, and now he has commissioned me, who am wise and old, to contrive with you that the lady see him — herself unseen, mark you — with some daughter of the city, one that will not be too coy; and that, so seeing, she may ignore or despise him; while it is for me to note her manner and

discern whether our master's fear be true or at fault. Tell me, now; how shall we come to him? It is yours to find a girl and teach her her part; mine to devise some pretext to bring the lady, well disguised, where she shall see; and note, too, there is need of haste, for the Lord Simonetto is not patient — and there are the twenty ducats to be had."

"Eh-h, and so *that* is the game," said Sandro, thoughtfully. "A likely one enough. Well, the youth sleeps in an attic, with another like him, but a short way from our gate. As for the day, he paints at San Severo; and now?"

Monna Cecca's face was in the shadow.

"It is hard to compass. To the attic? I dare not; to the convent? how shall women gain entrance?"

The spy laughed. "Monks' rules bow to those of princes, and to our princes most of all."

"But if we go as Baglioni —"

"S–s, s–s, I am earning my twenty ducats, foolish old one. I, wearing the red and green hose of the livery of the high and mighty house, lead you both, veiled, dark-robed, and masked, to a closet from which a little window opens upon the chapel where he paints, and another upon the gate where

he goes out in the evening. Trust me, the monks will speak no word to tell how we break convent rules at will. You shall see him go out, and, at the gate, a girl — none prettier in Perugia — shall carry him off an he will. The saints grant he play his part so that the Lord Simonetto deem him no rival, for he is a gay-hearted boy, and it is a pity to be killed before one has had one's fly."

Monna Cecca was nodding her head violently. "Well, and you are worth your salt after all. Be, then, at the little door at the foot of the narrow staircase behind the court, at half an hour before sunset. We shall join you. No

words, mark you! and look not too closely at the lady."

"I am no fool who does not know that the sun is bad for weak eyes: and the twenty ducats?"

"Put your hand at your side when we meet you."

"That will suffice — and now I am to my Messer Virgilio again. A fair return to you!"

Monna Cecca turned and shuffled down the stairs. All the keenness and strength of the last few moments seemed to have gone from her and she wagged her head as she went.

"Aye, aye; I am a fool well enough, with all my years. It is for my little bird. She shall have

her will, and it is a sword to a distaff the young sprig of myrtle kisses the first pretty face he sees. Then the madness and the danger is past, and old Monna Cecca is wise again after all."

VII

THE LADY OTTAVIA HAS HER WILL

DURING these days, observed by none save a few monks, the Assumption at San Severo grew apace. It was a work upon which "The Perugian" had done little save the cartoon and the heads of the principal figures — for the convent was not rich. To Ercole had fallen the faces of angels bending down to welcome the Mother of their King into their august assemblage, or bearing up her blessed form upon their hands and wings; and to these the young painter had imparted such beauty that the good brothers gazed wondering, enraptured, blessing God that He had

indeed permitted them to look upon beings from His own glorious household depicted for His servants' happiness and confident repose.

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A day more had come and well-nigh gone.

Who but Brother Benedetto, that watched at the chapel gate, saw the three visitors who demanded admittance when dusk was falling? — two women, — he knew they were women, despite his dim eyes and however closely they were veiled and masked, and he knew well the livery of the Baglioni and the badge upon the breast and shoulder and cap of the bravo who guarded them. Recognizing it he trembled,

and, when he of the high and mighty house whispered in his ear words of an appointed meeting for private confession in the closet against the chapel, Brother Benedetto only nodded and pointed, as if eager to pass such visitors into other hands and presences. These unavoidable infractions of rules, he deemed, were for higher powers to pass upon, and if the meeting were by appointment — well, then there was no need for him to bear word of it. He would confess and do the prescribed penance: an easy escape enough.

Meanwhile Sandro led his charges to a little closet, and, the women having hurried within, he closed

the door and stood in the passage, that he might bar even priestly interruption.

Drawing the curtain aside, Ottavia looked out, trembling, into the chapel.

In every corner of the vaulted room lay the fast gathering darkness; the paintings on the walls seemed vague and formless, the altars loomed dim in the shadows: but it was none of these things she noted. Ercole was there, and her eager eyes flew to him. To these three visitors what different thoughts were present. Sandro, in the passage, thought of young Simonetto and wondered which lady of Madonna Lavinia's household this

was — for that she was such he felt well assured. Not that he cared, but only because it was his business to think such things. Monna Cecca waited impatiently for the hour of Ercole's outgoing, when he should surely break the charm that held her sweet lady so unworthily and at so much peril. Ottavia thought nothing. Even her gratitude for this indulgent connivance of her nurse had left her mind.

Ercole sat upon a low stool before his work, now indistinguishable in the gloom; his bowed head rested upon his folded arms, and his dark hair fell about his face. He sighed deeply. Then he turned toward one of the little altars; and, as he

crossed the room, the last ray of light, shining through a narrow window, fell upon a face older by years than when Ottavia had seen it last in its spirit of mingled boyish bravado and chivalric devotion. He threw himself on his knees before some sculptured saint who shone ghostly in the darkness. Several moments passed, and then, rising to his feet, he walked quickly from the chapel. Monna Cecca was plucking nervously at Ottavia's gown.

"Quick, quick now!" she said. "To the other window with you! You shall see him go out by the postern."

Ottavia's eyes were brimming with tears, and the gladness of her

face, as she turned, pierced the old woman's heart like a poniard thrust. She wondered, too, and even wavered in her hope. But no, he would surely fail if her judgment of a face and carriage were aught. There had been no space for her also to look through the window into the chapel; — he would fail, and her nursling would be happy, and the boy, too, would live — all of which was well.

And now the young monk had unbarred the postern, and Ercole glided out, knowing nothing of those who saw him go. He was vaguely conscious that a girl with black eyes, big and sparkling, stood before him and smiled and held out a flower.

Ottavia saw him put out his hand and take it with a murmured, "May the saints bless you," and she saw him turn aside to pass on, for the girl had planted herself in his path. The effort to detain him seemed hardly to break his stride, and he hurried away, his head drooping upon his breast as he walked. Astonished, Sandro's accomplice gazed after him and took a few steps as if to follow, while Ottavia, at her post by the window, clenched both her hands tight. Then she gave a contented little sigh and the girl in the street uttered an angry hiss and stamped her foot. They had both seen the flower drop from Ercole's fingers as he vanished in the shadows of the houses.

VIII

MESSER ERCOLE HEARS A SONG

IN their attic that night it was Raffaello who laughed and chattered of nothings, while Ercole sat with deaf ears and knitted brows, pondering — "Matters of statecraft?"

Rising at last, he threw out both arms as if to be rid of thoughts, like a dog that shakes himself, leaping from the water.

"The sky hangs low upon my heart to-night," he said. "What manner of air is this that we breathe?"

He turned toward the door.

Raffaello sprang up, with eyes at once grown serious, and laid a detaining hand upon his sleeve.

"It is better to breathe this than to breathe no air at all."

Ercole shook his head slowly.

"You do not truly think so," he said; "but whether you do or no, my dæmon, as your philosophers held, beckons me to the streets to-night."

"I pray you —"

"Pray for me, if you will. Perhaps I shall go to the Casa Baglioni. Is it not to-night they play the 'Orfeo' of the Florentine?"

He spoke with a ring of defiance in his voice. Then it softened, and he went on dreamily:

"It was the poor Messer Orfeo who lost his love because he could not forbear to look upon her. I,

too, am minded to look, and if the Baglioni be as cruel as the wicked Prince Pluto, I promise you I shall at least return with her to the shades."

"It is madness," cried Raffaello.

"Then this madness and I are one."

They stood facing each other: Raffaello, alert, seeming to weigh in his mind what argument or force might check the project; Ercole with the inlooking eyes of one in a trance—a sleep-waker. Suddenly he turned, sprang through the doorway and, hurling it to behind him, dashed headlong down the stair. Raffaello, lulled into a sense of safety by the mood or craft of his

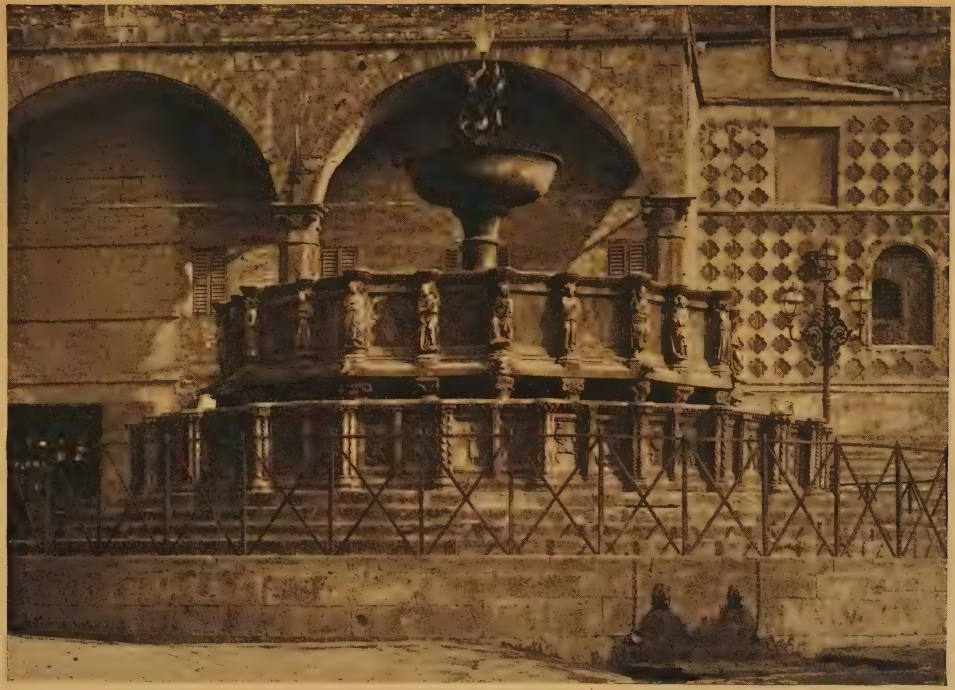
friend, scarce gathered himself to follow until the footsteps rang distant on the stones below.

Then he too rushed down and, reaching the street, paused, gazing right and left into the hurrying crowd. He ran toward the Casa Baglioni, but the pikemen stopped him and forbade his passing before it, lest his feet should soil the rich carpets spread there for the guests. He dared not cry out, or even ask questions that might draw attention and excite inquiry. Realizing, at last, that his friend, sane or mad, had escaped him and must take what chance the saints sent, he returned slowly to their attic, minded now to prayers for

Ercole's safety and again to curses upon his folly.

Meanwhile the truant, divining that Raffaello would pursue in the other direction, ran up toward the corso and, paying little heed to the anger of those he jostled, soon reached the main street of the town. There, feeling safer against pursuit, he turned toward the piazza and held his way at a more moderate pace.

Ercole had spoken truly of his desire to escape the burden of oppressive thoughts. No definite plan had prompted his act save the one wish to go out under the sky; only his defiant threat that he would go to the Casa Baglioni, to



The Pisano Fountain in the Piazza

Ottavia, had thrust the idea into his head, and now it kept surging, surging there with each pulse of blood that seemed to fill his skull to the bursting. Yes, he would go, he would see her; why not? Who should stay him? only how? how?

He had reached the piazza at last. The crowd was dense enough, though less so than in the narrow streets that led to the houses of the Baglioni. He made his way toward a group clustered about Pisano's fountain, whence came the music of a lute and a voice singing the words of a *villotta*. Something in their sadness, so foreign to the sentiment of rustic dance songs, attracted him; but

the peasants and town rabble sensed none of this. So be the musician marked the time well, they danced and laughed and exchanged ribald jests and were content to give him coppers.

Ercole listened. The singer seemed a man little older than himself, with clothes that were at once gay and old and very clean. He was repeating the song now at the command of his patrons:

"Many there are who when they hear me sing
Cry: There goes one whose joy runs o'er in song;
But I pray God to give me succoring,
For when I sing 't is then I grieve full strong."

"It is I could sing *villottas* were it only grief that bred them," thought Ercole. He drew nearer,

and at that moment the dancers seemed to weary ; the music ceased, and, casting a few coins into the musician's cap, they moved away.

As the man took the money Ercole looked at him more closely. Surely his were the motions of the blind, — ah ! yes, and now he remembered that he had heard Raffaello tell of such an one who had come in from somewhere on the country-side — perhaps from the North — he could not recall.

His eyes wandered to the fountain that lay clear for a moment in the glare of the torches and cressets, and he fell to tracing the reliefs carved there : brave deeds of King Saul and King David and the holy prophets

of God's word, and, strangely mingled with them, pictures of the quaint scenes of which that wisest of pagans, Messer Æsop, had told. A feeling of kinship in sorrow seized upon him and, going up to the singer, he took his hand.

"Do you not know, friend, how beautiful is this fountain by which you sit? Come, it is the touch shall tell you"; and setting the blind man's fingers to the heads and limbs and drapery, he guided him slowly along the outlines.

"They are smooth and daintily rounded, truly," murmured the other, "but, oh! they are hard and cold, like the rich and great." And then, touching Ercole's cap and

shoulder with his free hand: "But you, too, are of the noble—of God's truly noble, mayhap, who love the poor and the unfortunate."

"That is to tell me that I love myself," said Ercole. "What is a full belly and a gay cap and cloak, if one have not his desire?"

"Yet there are those whose need of cloak and food is so great that they have no thought of other desires," said the blind man.

Ercole paused and leaned on the fountain. Suddenly an idea flashed through his brain.

"If you say it," he cried, "we shall help each the other to his wish. I think, now, that I have need of your clothes and of your

lute there, and in return for them you shall have mine, together with my purse, which I warn you is not heavy. Nevertheless you will gain by the bargain."

"Yes, surely I will gain." There was both wonder and something of suspicion in the voice.

"It is for a masque I would have them," said Ercole. "Come, we shall seek a doorway in some dark street. Come quickly": and, drawing the musician after him, he led the way out of the crowd toward the older portion of the town, where stood the ancient Arch of Augustus. Here were few prying eyes, and the shadow of the wall offered shelter and concealment.



THE ARCH OF AUGUSTUS

The change of costume was soon completed. The blind man fingered the purse and passed his hands over the texture of the brave finery that was now his, still as if doubtful of his fortune.

"It is the worth of ducats, the beautiful clothes," he said.

Ercole snapped his fingers. "What is that, so I am for to-night the blind singer of the piazza? Be here to-morrow at this hour and perchance you shall have your lute again. If I do not come, the purse will pay you for it and for the loss of a day."

Slowly the man's sluggish thoughts seemed to grasp fully the purpose of his benefactor.

"You must walk slow and halting," he said, "and yet less halting than one might think, for we who are blind learn to feel much of the nearness of things that we do not see or touch."

Ercole struck the strings of the lute. His borrowed garments fitted him as well as such clothes are apt to fit their last wearers. "Come," he said, "where now shall I lead you before I go?"

The blind man laughed sharply. "Truly if they saw you leading me thus on the street, there would be talk of miracles. You had best leave me to find my way, as I have found it for all these years. Have a care you find yours as well,

and take heed that it end not in a narrow house."

"That is all one asks when one comes to sleep," said Ercole, and then, shaking himself free from dark thoughts: "The saints hold us both in their keeping! Until to-morrow, friend."

IX

THE BLIND SINGER SEES THE "ORFEO"

ERCOLE turned and made his way down the street, the lute slung over his shoulder, his hands stretched out as if to feel his path, his eyelids drooping until he saw but dimly a short stretch of pavement before his feet. When he had regained the piazza he seated himself by the fountain, and, taking the lute in his hands, tuned it and essayed a Tuscan dance song.

In a moment idlers had paused and drawn around him. Perhaps their memories were not critical; perhaps they neither cared nor thought who piped, so they danced to the piping: but their easy

acceptance of him in the character he had assumed and the touch of the coins they left in his battered cap filled him with a confidence that until then he had not felt.

When his patrons had sported their fill and swept on to new merry-makings, he again slung his lute upon his back and turned his halting steps toward the palaces of the Baglioni.

One precaution he had taken through all his doings of the night: his short townsman's sword still hung at his side, caught up a little higher so that the droop of his cloak might hide its incongruous presence.

It was a slow way to the spot he sought—a way suited of necessity to

the progress of a blind man through crowded streets. Time and again he came against those rushing in the opposite direction, and his words of explanation and apology brought curses or laughter, or perhaps coins, as the temper and sobriety of the others might prompt; only, through it all, he gained in practice of his part and in self-reliance. Once, even, he had been forced to stop and play, but the street here was too crowded for dancing, and the revellers soon dismissed him. At last the more closely packed people and the guard of pikemen told him he was near the centre of the festivities, but, as if unseeing, he pushed on.

"Stand back there!" cried a friendly voice. "They will spit you like a gosling!"

Ercole still groped his way forward, half thinking each moment to feel the point in his bosom. A hush in the babble of the crowd seemed to presage some such event. Then: "Hold! do you not see he is blind?" came from several directions.

He was conscious of a pike raised before his advance, and a rough hand fell upon his shoulder.

"This is no *festa* for blind beggars! Get you to the rabble!"

Ercole fell into the professional whine of the craft.

"And is it not to-night when

our most noble princes will that all shall be happy, rich and poor? Who knows but that, in receiving, I may add something to their entertainment or to that of the gallant gentlemen who wear their livery? Even you, good captain, might be the gayer for a song."

He could feel the fellow relax at the words "gentleman" and "captain."

"Ho!" he said, with a short, embarrassed laugh. "It is something for old Gianbattista to be thought noble and a captain, even by a blind man."

"And is it not the blind who feel the true nobility of the character," said Ercole, "since they

have no eyes to see the badges and fine raiment in which knaves mask?" He had unslung his lute as he spoke. "Shall I not strike a chord for your magnificences?"

Evidently the bravo's mood had softened, for he said nothing, and the voices of those around seemed to be hushed in acquiescence. Ercole began the carnival song of Lorenzo de' Medici that runs to the refrain,

"Fair is youth and void of sorrow,
But it hourly flies away,
Youths and maids, enjoy to-day,
Nought ye know about to-morrow."

The crowd grew very quiet; the charm of his voice seemed to draw them into sympathy with the spirit of the verse, and when he sang

"None but thankless folk and rough
Can resist when Love beguiles,"

the roughest nodded in pleased acquiescence. With the strain:

"See this load behind them plodding
On the ass! Silenus he,
Old and drunken, weary, nodding,
Full of years and jollity,
Though he goes so swayingly,
Yet he laughs and quaffs alway:"

then the crowd laughed and beat time with their feet; and they shouted their approval at the

"Midas treads a weary measure,
All he touches turns to gold:
If there be no taste of pleasure
What 's the use of wealth untold?
What 's the joy his fingers hold
When he 's forced to thirst for aye?"

At last came the closing stanza:

"Ladies gay and lovers young!
Long live Bacchus, live Desire!
Dance and play: let songs be sung;
Let sweet love your bosom fire;
In the future come what may!
Youths and maids, enjoy to-day."

A roar of applause followed the song. He who had halted the musician spoke now in a soft voice.

"It is a pity, friend, that you know only with your ears the beauties you sing. Go now where you please. There may be those within who will take joy from you."

With a new and different roughness that seemed assumed to hide any show of feeling, he pushed Ercole through the line of guards, and the singer found his way, unchecked, to the entrance of the

house, where, mingling in the crowd of servitors who thronged the gateway, he pressed boldly on into the court.

Once in, it was easy to slip behind those who were thrusting forward most vigorously, and to seek the shadow of a wall, whence he might steal a glance about him without hazarding notice; not a safe risk, at the best, for the whole space blazed with lights.

At the farther side a scaffolding had been erected and hung with rich velvets and damasks with interwoven coats of arms. Temporary wooden galleries occupied the three remaining sides, thronged with the rich and great: beautiful ladies and

proud nobles; friends, allies, secret enemies of the Baglioni and the Orsini, blazing with jewels, brilliant in many-colored silks and satins.

Ercole dared not seek too openly for her face, but he imagined that, being of the near kin, she would be somewhere in the gallery that faced the stage. Then, gradually, he grew bolder, noting how absorbed in the spectacle before them were all the servants, retainers, and favored townsfolk who packed the court below.

He had heard often of this Messer Angelo Poliziano — how his wonderful masque had been first done near twenty years ago at Mantua, for the pleasure of the Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga; and here, now,

the fable was again played and sung for the Baglioni and their guests.

It seemed that the piece must be wellnigh over, and, filled with his own thoughts, he listened, but half heeding its tale, yet he started at such lines as those Mnesillus sang:

"Mark ye how sunk in woe
The poor wretch forth doth pass";

and then Orfeo himself, at the gate of Hell, voiced his plaint:

"Pity, nay pity for a lover's moan!
Ye powers of Hell, let pity reign in you!
To your dark regions led by Love alone,
Downward upon his wings of light I flew.
Hush, Cerberus! Howl not by Pluto's throne!
For when you hear my tale of misery, you,
Nor you alone, but all who here abide
In this blind world, will weep by Lethe's tide."

Ercole found himself stealing furtive glances to right and left,

doubtful, almost, whether the peculiar aptness of the sentiment were not aimed expressly at his unmasking and whether all around must not, of necessity, realize who he was and wherefore he stood there. Then suddenly he awoke to the absurdity of his apprehension and smiled to himself.

At that moment a man pushed against him, as if trying to force himself to a better point of view, and, in quick resentment, Ercole turned instinctively to see who it was. Then, conscious of the unguarded movement, he tried to cover it by swinging his head as quickly to the other side. Had the fellow noted the slip? Ercole had

marked that he was of middle height and slender, dressed in plain brown hose and jerkin and wearing no weapon but a dagger. His eyes had remained fixed upon the stage, as if so absorbed in the show as to be unconscious of his offence and of his neighbor's presence; and the blind singer, while he allowed the sense of relief to calm his anxiety, took counsel with himself for greater caution.

Meanwhile the masque was drawing to its end and the wild chorus of the mænads rang out:

"With ivy coronals, cluster and berry,
Crown we our heads to worship thee.
Thou hast bidden us to make merry
Day and night in our jollity!
Drink then! Bacchus is here! Drink free,
And hand ye the drinking cup to me."

Throughout galleries and court the audience was one with the performers: eyes sparkled, cheeks flushed, and lips parted, if not to join in the song, at least in eagerness to obey its welcome precepts. Love and wine and the dance: such was the strain wherewith to woo Perugia; and when the last lines died away with their

"Bacchus! we all must follow thee.
Bacchus! Bacchus! ohe! ohe!"

cries of delight burst from all sides. Stage and players seemed for a moment as if they must be covered and overwhelmed with the flowers and gold and jewels that were hurled upon them.

In the uproar and confusion

Ercole ventured again to look about him in a vain effort to find her face in one of the galleries. He began to fear she was in that directly above him and to see which he must make his way across the court. Was his adventure with all its peril to end only in this added consciousness of nearness? That was much; but he sought more. It was to see her that he had played the game to-night, — to see her, even amid the circle of her kinsmen and worshippers, for surely all men were the one or the other. Yes, he would not fail of his desire; he would cross the court, pretext or no pretext, discovery or no, for soon, perhaps even now,

they would be leaving the galleries for the dancing in the great hall, where he could not hope to follow. He started to push in front of his neighbor who had jostled him a few minutes past. Then he felt the man's hand on his arm and heard him say in a low voice:

"Where would you be going, friend? Who knows but the saints will give me their favor if I lead Christ's blind."

Ercole hesitated, startled into an instant of confusion; but he saw the hopelessness of pursuing his quest if he would preserve his disguise.

"Our Lady grant you mercy!" he murmured. "God has given

the blind to find their way without sight — since they must."

"Aye, but in a press like this it may happen that he overlook them," pursued the man. Was there a flavor of irony in the fellow's voice?

"I seek the street," said Ercole, "so there be no more to hear." Further demurring could but lead to suspicion, if it were not already aroused.

His conductor was now guiding him through the crowd, holding fast to his arm, and Ercole closed his eyes in the knowledge that seeming reliance was the safest and only course. Winding, stopping, turning, — even the sense of direction

soon left him. Torches and cressets had set the court aglare. It was darker now; and surely there was a chill deeper than under the broad archway that led into the street.

"Where go we, friend?" he asked, holding back a little as if doubtful of his steps.

His guide spoke reassuringly.

"It is a secret way that leads without hindrance where we seek. Since you are blind there is no harm that I lead you by it."

Ercole felt the stone walls on either side of him, and went on, since to show reluctance meant only greater peril. Then came descending steps, circling round and round, that made the heart sink equally,

as the body seemed to go down into the earth.

"Where go we?" he asked again.

There was no answer, but he felt himself pushed forward and heard the clang of a door behind him and the shooting of a bolt. Safe, at last, in the consciousness of despair, he opened his eyes and looked about.

X

BENEATH THE CASA BAGLIONI

ERCOLE had feared to find only blackness, but a dim light, as of moon or stars or distant torches, came through a little grated window, or ventilator, near the top of the room. Apparently it opened into some smaller and inner court of the building, for no hum of voices or sound of footsteps told of the revellers he had left behind him. Fully eight feet from the floor, this window of his afforded little outlook unless one leaped up and held himself by the bars. That, he thought, might be done later. Otherwise the room was, at least, no dungeon of the worst sort. It was

small and the stone of the walls was covered with plaster, while a rough pallet with a blanket thrown over it offered much better comfort than was whispered of certain prison chambers in the Casa Baglioni. Escape, to all appearances, seemed quite beyond the possibilities, and now, with failing fortunes, the spirits of Ercole rose. Had he not the blind man's lute for companion of constrained idleness, and his own sword for brother-in-arms should desperate emergency arise? Surely they three were not such a wretched company, happen what might.

An hour, perhaps two, drifted by. He had been thinking of many

things. It was darker, now, in his prison, doubtless because the light of the illumination had died down, and only the two or three stars he could see when he came close under the grating told of a world without. He rose and paced slowly up and down the narrow quarters, accustoming his eyes to the gloom. Suddenly he caught or seemed to catch the sound of whispering, and, halting close to the door, strained his ears to listen, wondering vaguely at their acuteness. Everything seemed so black and so still save the two voices — he knew that there were two, a man's and a woman's. Soon even their words became distinguishable.

"Perhaps it will be safe for him to go now?" he heard the woman say, and his heart gave a great leap; but no, that was not *her* voice, and the man answered:

"S–st, s–st; be patient, mother. The night is long, and the hours here will serve to cool the boy's blood. He is a pretty boy enough and a brave one, though a fool. There were eyes he knew naught of watching him in the court, and it was not in my mind to let him run his head into the noose."

"You are a kindly knave, Sandro; and who knows but there will be more gold coming to you for this night's work." The woman's voice sounded more of a mumble than

of a whisper, but her companion silenced her.

"Yes, yes, that is well," he said sharply; "always gold for the spy. We shall see —"

"Aye, gold and blessings with it; blessings that go not too often with the gold you earn —"

"S–st!"

The voices suddenly became still, and Ercole, recognizing the friendliness of his unknown visitors and listening hard to hear the bolt drawn, became aware in a moment of a new sound, as of some distant commotion.

"Holy Virgin!" whispered Monna Cecca. There was terror now in her tones; and then from Sandro:

"We must fly, and quickly. Only the saints know who is abroad here to-night. Pray your gentle Lord Christ — "

The sentence died away, and Ercole heard the quick shuffle of their feet as the man seemed to drag his companion along the corridor. Then the new sounds took form: the hurried footsteps of several men coming down the passage from the other direction, and, now and then, a ring as of some weapon striking against the wall. There seemed, too, a suggestion of confusion and unevenness in their approach, as if they were carrying or dragging some body. Certainly there was little attempt at silence,

for, as they halted before the door of Ercole's prison, he heard harsh voices raised in excited discussion.

The words were of little moment to him. From the accents he knew the speakers were men of the rough, peasant class from which the great houses drew their lowest, staunchest, and most unscrupulous retainers. He would learn their purpose soon enough now, and he drew back into the darkest corner of the room, sword in hand, but with the blade swathed in his cloak so that no light might glint upon it.

A second more and the bolt grated, the door was dashed open. A single torch without threw its light upon a confused group of perhaps

half a dozen men among whom a struggle of some sort seemed to be going on. He heard blows, curses, groans.

"Tickle his ribs well, Jacopo."

"There! there too! and again!"

"Laugh merrily now. It is our jest that strikes home."

Several men had spoken almost together. Someone seemed to fall forward, as if pushed or thrown by the others, and crashed down in a heap in the middle of the floor.

"So, now! Let him lie and eat of his sins," said one.

"And come, Beppo; we will drink of yours," laughed another.

They had neither looked for nor seen the other occupant of the

room. The door was drawn to, and the hope that had flashed through Ercole's mind died down as he heard the bolt shoot.

"The fools, to lock in a dead man!" he muttered. Then he smiled at his own indignation. Doubtless bolts were shot by habit in the Casa Baglioni, whether there were seeming need or no.

One thing, first of all, was to be done. Something lay before him on the stone floor, horrible in its stillness, its silence, and its shapeless outlines shadowy in the darkness. He must know if it were still a man or only clay.

The footsteps of the retreating bravoes had died away in the

corridor, and Ercole glided out and, kneeling, felt eagerly for heart and pulse. No faintest flutter met the touch of his hand, and he drew it back wet and trembling. He had a companion now in his prison, but that companion was a dead man, murdered by the bravoes of the Baglioni. Why? To think of reasons opened a field of conjecture hopeless in its vastness. Still, an examination might disclose something, and he turned again to the body.

The clothes were not fine: that was evident. Therefore the poor wretch had not been a gentleman, — some gay rival of a fiercer wooer. He had his purse still, with a few

coins in it, which seemed to bar robbery as a motive. Weapons? The searcher could find none, but, as he rose and stepped back, his foot struck against something that slid noisily upon the stone. A moment, and he held in his hand a short, stout dagger with a sharp cutting edge and a rough file-like back — such a knife as he knew thieves often carried, useful alike to cut flesh or iron.

Here, then, was the story. This fellow had gotten no more than his deserts: a cutpurse, in all likelihood, who had worked his way into the show to ply his craft, and the victim now of rude justice, that differed little in its execution from the crimes it punished.

Suddenly a new thought leaped into Ercole's mind. Was not this weapon and tool, half knife, half file, fashioned expressly to cut through bars like those that fenced the window of his cell? To think was to act, for every moment might bring new peril.

With the dagger in his teeth, he crouched low under the window, and, springing up, caught the bars. Winding one arm around them to hold himself there, he grasped the hilt in the other hand and drew the file edge across the iron. A few strokes showed him that it was tempered well for its work.

He could see out now into the

court that lay above him and be sure that it remained empty, that no one came within hearing of the low gritting of the file that was winning his way to freedom. Yet it was necessary to work cautiously, to press hard and draw the blade slowly across the bar.

One was severed, now, at the lower end, so that it could be bent up. Two, he measured, would give space enough for a slender fugitive like him to slip through; but his arm was numb from sustaining his weight, so he dropped to the floor and rubbed it back into life. Then he sprang up again.

The pain of the drawn and compressed muscles came quickly this

time, but he clenched his teeth and struggled with the second bar until it also was cut through. All that remained was to regain his strength, to leap once more, bend the two loose bars back and pull himself through into the court. Thence there would be at least a fair chance to reach the street.

While he was resting for this final effort, voices and footsteps again came to his ears. Now was no time to take chances of friends or foes. What must be done must be done at once, and he sprang toward the window, drawing himself slowly up and pushing with all his strength against the severed bars.

Gradually they bent outward, and, writhing and struggling, he forced himself through the broadening space. That much was over. His clothes were torn and soiled, his hands bleeding, and every muscle ached, but he was under the stars at last; — not many, to be sure, for the court was small and the walls straight and high, but free for such better or worse fortune as might befall.

Turning back toward his prison, he quickly bent the bars into their places again, and, as he did so, he heard the bolt creaking. Friends or foes? and if neither surely the latter. He need not wait now to learn. Gliding swiftly around the

court, he sought an outlet, unable to locate even its general position in the mass of buildings.

At last he came to a low vaulted passage and, with his sword in one hand and the thief's knife in the other, he pressed forward into the darkness. His lute had been left in the prison chamber, as being much too awkward a burden for so hazardous a venture. Suddenly his foot came against a step.

Peering closely into the darkness and feeling carefully about, he made out at last a double continuation of the passage; one branch of which seemed to lead up a very narrow staircase, the other, down one equally confined.

Down or up was hardly a question. The one could lead only to storerooms or dungeons; the other — surely "up" combined both the rational and the propitious, and he pushed on, counting the steps as he went.

He had mounted twelve when the path became level once more, and, better yet, a dim light, as of the night, but brilliant to the tangible darkness around, now shone to guide him on. A moment more, and he looked out upon the main court with its stage and galleries and rich hangings, ghostly in their emptiness and silence and weird, shifting shadows.

Guards there seemed to be none,

and, keeping close to the wall and under the gallery, he made toward the archway leading to the street, his heart beating fast at the nearness of liberty and safety.

XI

MESSER ERCOLE SAYS A PRAYER

PAUSING an instant, before he left the shelter of the shadows, Ercole's eyes sought once more around the enclosure. Were there a porter at the entrance, a quick rush or, at the worst, a sword thrust should win by him. Lights still shone from several of the windows high up in the opposite wall. A flood of emotion filled his soul.

Ah! what manner of lover was he! He had perilled much only to be near her; and now, in all these hours of present danger, in the loneliness of prison, in the excitement of the suspended stroke of fate and the joy of escape, surely it

was her sweet spirit that had guarded him. He had relied on his own strength and cunning, on blind fortune; he had plunged, thoughtless or enwrapped, into the absorbing allurements of the game of life and death, heedless of the protection of a love whose servant no steel could pierce, no fates perturb. Self-abasement, remorse, devotion, deeper, stronger, more enveloping than ever, filled and suffused his whole being. Once before he had ascended that stair which gleamed white, now, across the open space, in a ray of the moon. Yes, he would mount it again, if only to cast away the safety he had won so unworthily; — for penance, for joy;

to seek her door and kneel before it, to proclaim his unworthiness and his faith, to pray God and the gentle Christ and all his glorious saints to hold her in their keeping. Surely a prayer uttered at the peril of life must avail more before the court of Heaven than those fair-day petitions uttered in chambers ere we close our eyes to safe and easeful rest, intoned in church and cell with the perfunctory fervor of avarice or habit or ennui.

He stepped out boldly into the moonlight, driving his sword into its sheath and slipping the dagger under his belt.

Straight across the court and into the entrance opposite lay his course;

up the stairs that grew darker as he mounted. What need of seeing? Only once before had he gone up and down, yet every step, every turn lay clear in his mind as if trodden a thousand times.

No one barred his way. The house slept, more soundly, perhaps, because the gods who hold lovers in their keeping had won the gods of sleep to their aid.

He was near her door now. No lamp or torch relieved the dense gloom, but he knew it well, and with hands stretched out before him he touched it with the tips of his fingers. Beyond that barrier sweet, virginal sleep held sway, and, here, he — how unworthy even to petition

God for her safety! He sank down, resting his brow against the oaken panel, his hands clasped above his head, and his heart spoke.

"Ah, Mary! Gentle Virgin! Who but thou shalt keep purity in thy hand? safe from the arrows of fate, from evil men, from me, who kneel here for thy grace! Mary! Bride of Heaven! Mother of Jesus! grant now to my peril her joy; to my death, if thou so will it —"

Slowly the door opened before him, and a glory seemed to flood the passage. Ercole bent lower amid the divine effulgence. It was life that was going from him now — ah, how gladly! the offering accepted, the price taken —

"I knew you would come: that you were here."

The voice that spoke was very low and sweet. He raised his eyes slowly in his ecstasy, and saw her standing there within reach of his hand, her bright hair flowing down, her lips smiling, her eyes sad and troubled yet full of a tender joy.

"I knew you were here," she said again, but he only gazed as in a dream and murmured:

"Yes, here."

Was it the Lady of Heaven in *Her* likeness? Surely God was very merciful.

"It was to pray for my safety that you came?" she went on.

"Yes, to pray."

"I am very happy for such prayers."

Ercole put out his hand slowly, hesitatingly, and, bending forward, touched the edge of her robe with his lips. Then he drew back and they looked full and long into each other's eyes. No question had been asked; no answer given. What need of words to those whose hearts lie open to be read? How vain the protestations of lovers, the seekings, the vows!

At last she spoke again, in the same low, even voice.

"You must go away now. You will come again."

"Yes, I will come again."

Why was there no thought in his

mind save of obedience? Why were there even no words of when and how? Surely all such things seemed very little. It would be to-morrow, it would be after many years, it would be, perchance, in God's City. What did it matter? He would come again and she would be glad of his coming, and all the time that fell between, were it moments or ages, would be nothing at all.

He rose slowly to his feet, half turning away, and yet with eyes fixed upon her face. Step by step he fell back. That which he had first dreamed to be a glory, the light of lamps from the room, dwelt about and caressed her as she stood looking after him into the darkness.

He was far down the stairs now, and his face was bent resolutely upon his way, yet the brightness seemed to go before him, as it did before the people in the Wilderness, and she seemed to put out her hand from it and take his hand, leading him gently. They had passed out into the court, — across it, to the archway. He did not see the porters sleeping there, for his eyes were still upon her, and he walked firmly, without thought of danger; yet the men woke not. Then his feet felt the pavement of the open street, and he passed his hand across his eyes, for she was gone, even as he stood before his door; and, when he mounted the stairs and entered,

Raffaello looked up, with a troubled face, from the book he sat reading, and looked long and said nothing, and Raffaello knew also, as Ercole knew, since all hearts were open to-night for a miracle that had never been given of God and would never be again.

So he fell asleep, and his companion came over and looked down at him and bent his head and smiled, thinking of the wondrous grace and of things that were and things that were not, and of what men call folly and what, wisdom, knowing nothing of the one or of the other.

XII

GIANPAOLO VIEWS A FRESCO

TWO weeks had passed. Ercole was painting late one afternoon, for the light of the declining sun shone well through the high, narrow windows, gilding the forms and colors into grander outlines and richer tints. Suddenly a commotion at the door caused him to turn. The monks were thronging in.

"The Perugian!" they cried. "The great Vannucci! He is coming!"

Not since Ercole had taken up the work had the Master visited San Severo. Perhaps it was a regard for his pupil's safety, the fear lest his coming might be tracked, that

kept him away; perhaps only the stress of other engagements or the festivities of the season. Ercole had not given the matter much thought, and was entirely willing to credit Messer Pietro with the less selfish motive, considering only the good fortune that he was come at last, since but few touches remained, and these for the most part ones especially reserved for the Master's hand. Now he was standing there in the doorway — walking slowly forward into the apartment — while Ercole, cap in hand, turned to study his face for approval or condemnation. What he saw was strangest of all. First, a flash of admiration, of joy, that

lighted up the harsh features like an aureole; then a sudden pallor that drove all else before it, and the man seemed to stagger back, as if from a blow, his knees trembling, his hand to his brow, his eyes resting first upon the painting and then shifting to Ercole with a gleam of abject terror in their depths.

"Unhappy boy, what hast thou done?"

Then Ercole, dazed, astonished, looked long at the picture, and, awakening suddenly, knew that all his beautiful angels were but so many faces of Ottavia Baglioni.

Noises came up from the street without, the sound of voices, of trampling feet, but Pietro Vannucci

and Ercole da Passigno stood like men spellbound, and the brothers whispered, wondering, one to another. An acolyte entered the room, running, and delivered a hurried message into the prior's ear, but neither the Master nor the pupil heard it. Then the old monk turned and spoke aloud, with a face in which much of gratification seemed overshadowed by something of anxiety.

"We are indeed honored, my brothers, as is our son here, Pietro Vannucci, whom the holy St. Luke has blessed in such high measure. Our house — God's house and that of the holy San Severo — is about to receive a noble company of

signors, who are come to view the new painting, and greatest and noblest of all, the gentle prince, Gianpaolo Baglioni — "

Vannucci started as if stung, but Ercole's face grew calm, and he turned, with folded arms, facing the door. Nevertheless this standing forth against the falcon was not to be permitted. Whether from a motive of self-preservation or from some sudden impulse of kindness, Vannucci sprang upon the young man, and, grasping his slender form by both shoulders, whirled him sideways toward a wall through which a low doorway seemed to lead to some inner part of the convent. A quick-witted brother, seeing the eagerness

of the action, had half instinctively thrown open the portal, and before Ercole could realize what was happening, he found himself in a dark passage with the door slammed to behind him. Then the grim humor of the situation came to him — his would-be pose of defiance, its crushing anticlimax from a dramatic standpoint — and he shook with suppressed mirth. Surely, too, there must be laughter in Ottavia's eyes? — kindly laughter that gained way the more freely because it was his safety that had been compelled.

Meanwhile, in the room from which he had been so unceremoniously ejected, there were no signs of levity. Prior and monks had stared

thunderstruck at the pantomime. That the situation was, for some reason, serious, they readily divined: why and how were the puzzles; but it was not difficult to conjure up a score of perils which the approach of the terrible Gianpaolo might call into being.

And now that prince himself stood in the entrance, while "The Perugian," having regained the centre of the room, was bowing low and trying to regain the breath of which his unwonted exertion had wellnigh deprived him.

Gianpaolo's eyes wandered slowly around the hall; not exactly as if seeking some one, but with a dreamy deliberation: then he acknowledged

slightly but gracefully "The Perugian's" salute, and glided forward with the springy, catlike tread peculiar to the man. Attendants and pages were clustered near the door, the prior had scarce recovered self-control sufficient to give his ecclesiastical greeting to his visitor, and the monks still stood at gaze like a flock of frightened sheep.

The Baglioni spoke in tones softer than velvet:

"I have been informed, good Messer Pietro, of the picture you are doing here — that it is wonderfully beautiful, and I have come to see it. I am informed of many things."

Despite his anxiety there was yet a measure of gratified vanity in the painter's mind, and he tried to persuade himself that, perhaps, after all, the visit might have no further significance than that alleged. For words, however, he used such as would best express his pleasure and surprise at the compliment and the honor done him. Gianpaolo interrupted his flow of speech, smiling, but with some shortness.

"Ah! good Messer Pietro, we know you are not always so humble as you choose to seem. Why should you be, for that matter? Is not a great artist the peer of princes? and I have been told you

would not hesitate to thwart me, if our wills ran counter. You are a brave man, Messer Pietro. But come," he added, hastily, "let us look upon the fresco;" for Vannucci seemed again attacked by symptoms of perturbation.

"It is even before your Magnificence," he said, standing a little to one side.

Full fifteen minutes, that were a very age, passed while Gianpaolo took in every detail of the composition. Not the slightest change of expression crossed his face to tell of discoveries and their effect, though Vannucci watched him as closely as he dared. At last he turned full to the painter, and,

looking him straight in the eyes — like the thrust of a lance, said:

"It is most praiseworthy, Messer Pietro — the composition, the drawing; and yet in smaller matters it seems to me to bear too much the marks of pupils' work. Take the word of a soldier, *mio caro*, when he warns you that danger lurks in trusting much to others: a robe, perhaps, to a young man, but not a face. I would advise you," and he drew closer and lowered his voice, "to correct certain faults yourself — in this Assumption. A citizen corrects inanimate things, lest his prince correct those that are animate." His voice was again taking on its milder tone. Then, glancing once

more at the picture, he added: "Nevertheless, your pupil seems a youth of much promise. If he live, I shall look to entertain him as a great artist some day — at Spello."

Bending his head slightly, for the prior's blessing, he passed out; the door closed behind his company, and Pietro Vannucci felt himself reeling like a knight in a joust, who, while he had kept his seat after a manner, had yet lost stirrups and rein at the shock of his opponent's lance.

There were a few moments of breathless silence — listening for retreating footfalls and for the creaking and crash of heavy oaken doors;

the picture was forgotten, and no man dared address his neighbor, for fear the words might be ill-advised. At last Vannucci, gliding over to the low doorway through which he had thrust Ercole, opened it and whispered his pupil's name. An answer came from the black depths beyond.

"Greeting to you, my Lord Gianpaolo! Is it that I shall come out and have my throat cut? or will your Magnificence enter and do it here? I am fairly enough snared, for this unhappy passage buts against a wall —"

"Silence, fool!" hissed Vannucci. "Thou knowest well it is I. Therefore come out and be silent, else it

were better to wall up the passage at this end also."

Ercole stepped out, blinking, but with an undisturbed air, and Vannucci, grasping him by the arm and motioning the prior to follow, pulled him away, heedless of the bulging eyes and open mouths of the monks, whose conventual repose had been so rudely broken in upon by such unwonted and unimaginable occurrences.

"Take us to your cell, father," cried the painter, when they were out of hearing, and the prior bowed his head meekly and led the way. Then, as they entered the narrow room with its plain whitewashed walls, Vannucci went on eagerly:

"Is he safe here? Can you keep him until nightfall?"

The prior turned his eyes upward. "Who can tell in these days, my son? When legates of the Holy Father are imprisoned or cast out of the city, what is it that the Baglioni respect? I shall strive with prayer and secrecy to hold him safe, but I warn thee do not trust us too long — if thou desirest him living and they, dead."

Vannucci had turned to Ercole, and spoke with more feeling than he had ever shown, a feeling which his gruffness of manner but faintly masked:

"Thou art a fool, boy. Were it not for thy good father's sake and

because thou art a worthy pupil I would not interest myself in so dangerous a matter. To-night this marriage will be finally celebrated, and perhaps Gianpaolo will think to leave thee until the morning. Raffaello will come here when the streets are dark — Raffaello has sense — and will lead thee to thy lodgings by the lanes that lie close to the wall. I am convinced that the place is unknown, or thou hadst been food for foxes long ago. Yet why he neglected to have thy path noted! It is unlike the race — unlike *him* most of all — "

The prior spoke up, interrupting: "It is God's will, son, that the race of the violent wax heedless in the

surety of their power. The Lord Gianpaolo may say, 'The young man is nothing. If — when — it pleases me, I shall find him easily and slay him — after the wedding-day has passed: — after the wedding-day has passed,'" and he fell to mumbling: "Who knows what days may pass? what days come? and who shall live to see them? It is violence and murder that rule in Perugia, and their legates are its lords, while the legates of that Lord who dwells in Heaven are cast out, despised, ill-treated, as was He, Himself; yet were Jerusalem and her proud ones brought low —"

He started and roused himself

from his reverie, for Vannucci and Ercole were kneeling for his blessing, that the former might depart to lay his plans for his pupil's escape.

XIII

A DREAM AND A FESTA

"THE Perugian" had gone, the prior withdrew to attend to some duty of his office, closing the door behind him, and Ercole remained alone in the little cell.

He had ceased thinking or planning; his life had come to be a dream wherein his own will had no bearing upon his acts or his fortunes. Even in his art, did he not paint that which no sentient volition prompted? All was fate: he would do nothing; he would live or die as the forces that controlled his destiny might provide: meanwhile, he would sleep, for sleep was dearest of all to him in these days, being

the true dreamtime, when he could at least deceive himself into a realization of power and place and presence equal to his heart's desire.

Hardly for a moment had he knelt at Ottavia's feet, for the way had been long to where she waited his coming, when a hand upon his shoulder called him back to waking consciousness and to the knowledge of sordid danger. Raffaello stood by the prior's pallet, and in his arms were fantastic gowns and masks. Ercole gazed, wondering, in the dim light.

"For you, *mio caro*," said the newcomer. "It is the Master sends them, that we may walk unnoted among the revellers. Once

at our lodgings, he thinks you may be safe for a few days, and then, who knows but that we can arrange for your escape!"

While Raffaello spoke, Ercole groped his way back to the world of men, — had bade adieu to golden eyes and hair, and had seen his mistress, with her finger to her lips, fade from his vision. He was to live for her; not to die: that was the last message of her eyes; and, springing up, he donned the carnival gown and mask.

In the corridor, by the door of his cell, they found the good prior, who blessed them while they knelt before him. Then he went ahead, and, with his own hands, drew the bar

and latchet of the little postern, and watched them go out into the night.

Aye! but was it indeed night? All Perugia seemed to blaze before their dazzled eyes: every window flickered with lights, every house was hung with lanterns that threw their brilliant illumination over the chains of roses that festooned the streets. No iron chains now barred them against men-at-arms. Were not the Oddi destroyed? and who else should threaten the proud name of Baglioni, that celebrated to-night the nuptials of one of its most gallant princes with a daughter of the greatest house in Rome?

At every corner oxen were roasting whole and casks of wine had

been broached that the people might join in the revelry of their lords. Many an invitation was extended to the student maskers to tarry and join some merry company. The hands of young men sought to drag them from the shadow into the light; the laughing eyes of girls flashed light into the shadow: all was jollity and good-fellowship, and it called for a strong purpose and a ready diplomacy to push on without suffering dangerous delay or giving still more dangerous offence.

It was Ercole who, seized by his oldtime spirit of recklessness, was ever the readiest to yield; and it was Raffaello, with nothing to fear save for his friend, who heaved a sigh

of heartfelt relief when at last they came in sight of their own threshold. The stricken chords of harp and lute and viol rang from the palaces a few steps beyond; voices of the hired singers, applause, laughter. Who was there to note the masked and cloaked figures that stole along under the shadows of the houses and slipped into a low portal? Was not all Perugia full of cloaks and masks to-night? — aye, and the shadow of masks through which gleamed fierce eyes and of cloaks beneath which lurked sword and poniard hung over the city, and the Baglioni feasted and caroused and made love, and the friars prayed for the souls of men in the convent of San Severo.

Raffaello and Ercole were safe now in their little attic under the rafters — as safe as one could be in Perugia whose blood had caught the scent of its savage lords. They had thrown aside their disguises, had talked long together, until the noises died slowly away and the lights faded out. Then each had lain down upon his oaken chest, seeking the invigoration of sleep that would not come.

"How quiet the city is now," said Ercole, after a long pause. "Do you sleep, Raffaello?"

"No, truly; sleep seems coy tonight, though I woo her faithfully."

"She is a jade," said Ercole, and laughed. "I chide her not, though. She knows well that to me she is now no more than a waiting-maid sent to lead me to my beloved, and who shall blame her if she chooses to resent the rôle — Hark! was that the cry of the watch? Did you catch the hour?"

"Watch to-night — in Perugia? What are you dreaming of? — that there is another man in the city as sober as we two?"

"There is the noble Astorre."

"Drunk with love and beauty."

"And the beautiful Simonetto."

"Drunk with envy of his cousin."

"Ah! but the gentle lord, Gianpaolo?"

"I said *man*. He is a tiger, and tigers are not drunken save on blood. Fifteen days of revelry have at least served to keep his dagger in its sheath."

XIV

"THE GREAT TREASON"

A SHRIEK rang out through the night, and the students started from their couches. Then pandemonium broke loose; the air was full of cries: commands, exhortations, curses, and screams of agony. There was the rush of feet — yes, and the clash of steel, but all seemed deadened, as if they came from a distance or through thick walls.

Ercole had lighted a taper, half instinctively, but Raffaello threw it upon the floor and placed his foot upon it: the moon, nearly full, shone through their skylight, and each saw the other's face, white and drawn. Their chamber had no window

looking into the street, so there was nothing to do but wonder and wait.

And now the noise and confusion had increased, was increasing with every moment. Had Pope Alexander declared war, and was Duke Valentino surprising and storming Perugia? or had the Oddi risen from their graves to repeat the attempt of five years ago? They heard hurried footsteps on the roof and grasped their swords. Murder was in the air, and their skylight offered but a feeble barrier. Still, those would be hardy men who descended — one at a time, as must be. Their pulses began to leap fiercely at the thought of fighting.

Then a shadow came between them and the moon, and, looking up, they saw a man bending over, as if trying to open the shutter. In an instant Ercole was himself: mystery and vague terrors had given place to something tangible, and he sprang to draw the bolt.

Raffaello caught his arm.

"In the name of the saints, do not open! It is some murderous bravo."

But Ercole shook him off.

"It is a fugitive," he cried. "Were he come to kill, he had broken through glass and frame: he who would fly safely, must leave no sign of his passage."

The window flew open, and a man sprang lightly down into the

room. Ercole closed and fastened the shutter: then he turned, saw his comrade staring with open mouth at their unexpected guest, and knew that he had admitted Gianpaolo Baglioni.

"You will pardon my disturbing your rest," said Gianpaolo, softly.

He and Ercole stood confronting each other, the latter with face tense drawn and white, the former with calm eyes in which no spark of recognition seemed to dwell. The moon again shone through the skylight, and the terrible sounds from the neighboring houses and the street came fuller and faster.

Gianpaolo unwound his cloak, which had been trussed about his

left arm, and laid his naked sword on Ercole's bed. Sword-belt, sheath or poniard he had none, and he stood, dressed only in his shirt and close-fitting hose, a model of power and slender grace. Then he said:

"It is a fugitive, signors, that you see. It is your lord who demands aid and succor against traitors and parricides."

"The noble Guidobaldo Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino, is my lord," began Raffaello, proudly; but Ercole, now cool and collected, interrupted:

"Nay, is it not he who is unfortunate that is always the lord of a brave man?" Then, to their guest: "Against what disaster must your

Magnificence take measures of defence?"

An expression not easy to read lay in Gianpaolo's eyes, that were regarding Ercole from beneath half-closed lids.

"I thank you for your courtesy," he said, "but, truly, I know little of what has happened. We had retired for the night, after our feasting and merrymaking, until I was aroused by cries, and saw Gianfrancisco della Corgna and my beautiful cousin, Grifonetto, and Messer Carlo of the Cock's Beard bursting into the room with drawn swords. It was but a moment to slip into the chamber of my good squire, Maraglia, and shut the door. An instant

later it too was burst open, but we were out on the staircase; the hall below seemed full of bravoes, and Maraglia bade me fly over the house-tops while he held the stair with his pike. To stay was to die with him, to escape was to live and avenge his death: that seemed better to us both," and the speaker ground his teeth in unspeakable rage, while his eyes blazed with a fury that seemed demoniac. The subtle noble was gone, and the furious beast of prey stood before them, trembling as if for the spring. Suddenly he grew calm.

"It is for you, Magnificence, to plan and for us to follow and aid," began Ercole.

"Listen, my good youth," said Gianpaolo, as if the other's words had gone by him. "Could I but pass the gates and reach the country, — Spello — Marsciano, I would take quick measure of vengeance. It is now, while they kill my people in their beds, that the walls are unguarded, and with a student's gown and a little bread — "

Ercole was already dragging a gown from the chest, while Raffaello went more slowly to pack the contents of their slender larder in a small pouch.

"Conceal my sword until I return," said Gianpaolo, as he bound the short, townsman's blade to his side; and Ercole hid the

beautiful weapon in a bundle of clothes. Down the stairs they passed, Ercole leading, and through the dark halls: the street was full of lights, and of surging and excited crowds that had little time to note who came and went. Hence it was easy to slip away amid the confusion.

At one point, where the press was thickest, they saw four corpses, naked and gashed with wounds, that had been thrown out upon the pavement, and lay there, majestic despite all, in the goodliness of masculine beauty — the terrible beauty of their race.

"Brother, uncle, two cousins," murmured Gianpaolo, gripping

Ercole's arm with a grasp that well-nigh forced a cry from his lips. He could not see the fugitive's face; but he saw that the dead men were the lords, Guido, Astorre, Gismondo, and Simonetto, and he thanked the saints that the fury of Gianpaolo's eyes was hidden beneath the close-drawn hood.

Then it was that Ercole witnessed some measure of the subtlety of princes. Laughing, jesting, questioning and answering, now with the careless air of a stranger, now with the eagerness of a gossip-monger seeking information, Gianpaolo pushed his way through the mob, each moment leaving the bands of murderers farther behind.

"Ha! it is the griffin that tears at its own breast to-night," he cried, touching Ercole's shoulder. "The prey may be safe for a while. That is good for quiet men and honest citizens. Come, let us back to our beds."

Several around them laughed, but Ercole felt his blood run cold under the hand upon his arm, though the voice that had spoken rang true.

The crowd had grown thinner now, and, as they approached the Gate Borgnie, the streets became deserted. Guards — all — seemed to have hurried into the town to ascertain the reason of the tumult, and they found no one save two soldiers that had kept their post.

Gianpaolo stepped up to one of these and, throwing back the hood of his cloak, bared his face and head.

The man peered at him, leaning forward, and Ercole loosed his short sword in its sheath; but the fellow had dropped upon his knees, trembling.

"Open me the gate," said Gianpaolo.

The warder beckoned to his companion, and together they threw off the chains and bars, and rolled the heavy gate back upon its pivots. Then they stood silent, still trembling. Gianpaolo watched them for an instant with head slightly bent, considering doubtless the wisdom

of killing both. He could see that they were much better armed than himself and Ercole; and he felt, perhaps, that he could not altogether depend upon the latter's aid. His reliance, therefore, would have to be only in the chance of a surprise and on the terror of his name.

"You are faithful to my house?" he said at last.

"To the death, Magnificence."

Gianpaolo smiled slightly, thinking perhaps of his deliberations of a moment past.

"You will aid me," he went on, "in a matter that requires haste and secrecy, and that brings high reward. Have you horses near?"

"But a few steps hence."

"How many?"

"Three, — that of our lieutenant and two others."

"Bring them at once. You shall attend me," he added, to the man who had spoken least; while the other, followed by Ercole at a sign from Gianpaolo, ran behind the guardhouse to where the horses were stabled. A moment later they returned; Gianpaolo threw himself upon the lieutenant's charger, and motioned the silent warder to mount the better of the remaining two. Grasping the third horse's rein, he thrust it toward the gate and pricked it deep with his sword. The animal sprang forward, lashing out with its heels, and dashed headlong down

the steep road. Then, turning to the other soldier who, with Ercole, was watching open-mouthed, he said:

"You have a free tongue, friend. Remain here, bar the gate, and tell your officer that this comrade of yours took advantage of the confusion to steal the horses and fly into the town, hoping, no doubt, to escape by another road; and that, being alone, you dared not leave your post at such a time to pursue him. The tale will doubtless stand, and you shall have equal reward with your fellow. If it be disbelieved, you will only die, as you would also if you failed or betrayed me." Turning to Ercole,



A View of the Via Appia in Perugia

he went on: "I had debated taking you with me, but it holds no advantage, and the greater the company the more readily are they tracked. Doubtless, too, you are not unwilling to delay the pleasure of a visit to Spello. I will make you my acknowledgments — on all our accounts — when I return."

Wheeling his horse, and still using his sword for a spur, he rode out, calling to the man he had selected and bidding him gallop a few paces in advance. Ercole and the last of the gate-wardens looked at each other for a moment. Then they closed and barred and chained the heavy portal, after which the soldier mounted to the watch-tower,

with his face pale and thoughtful in the moonlight, while the student hurried away into the shadow of the streets, thankful that it was not his office to answer the questions of the returning guards.

XV

GIANPAOLO COMES BACK TO PERUGIA

AS Ercole drew near his lodgings, he saw that the excitement had increased rather than abated and was spreading out like a fan to new quarters of the city. Once or twice he was stopped and questioned by men who seemed to be guarding the streets that led into the little square where he lived, but his insignificance and his manifestly studious calling saved him from the serious trouble that had beset others. Here and there he saw corpses stretched out or huddled in the gutter, and in several of the faces whereon the torchlight shone more brightly he recognized well-known retainers of the house

of Baglioni. At last he reached his door, and, with a sigh of relief, mounted hastily to his attic.

Raffaello also had his story to tell. The search for the escaping Gianpaolo had been thorough, though belated, and their quarters had not been overlooked. He had been questioned closely, and had denied any knowledge of the outbreak or the fugitive, explaining how his companion had gone down into the street to learn what was happening. With the exception that his was one of the skylights through which the fleeing man might have descended, no suspicion attached, and the pursuers had carried their inquiries and search elsewhere. Then

his anxiety had shifted to Ercole, and he greeted his safe home-coming with a warm embrace.

"Ah! *mio caro*," he cried. "Surely the saints watch over you! You are safe now, for a time at least."

"And why not for all time?" cried Ercole, gayly.

Raffaello looked puzzled.

"Do you imagine," he said, "that the Prince Gianpaolo will not return, and that there will not be such a throat-cutting as Perugia has seldom seen?"

"And what of it? Am I — are *we* not the saviors of his life?"

"Do you dream *that* will stay him from pursuing his policy?"

said Raffaello, scornfully. "The French and Germans call our Italian princes cruel and treacherous, because ours is a statecraft that clumsy foreigners cannot comprehend. Were you an aid to Gianpaolo Baglioni, he would feast and honor you though you injured and sought to slay him a hundred times; if you stand in his path, he will put you from it though you had saved his life a thousand."

Ercole had listened thoughtfully. Then his face brightened and he said:

"Listen, now; you are both right and wrong. He will not slay me, because he will not consider me sufficiently dangerous. He will

think to temporize by banishing me from his states. Thus, being duly accredited by injuries, I shall go to the Holy Father and Duke Valentino and win their interest: they shall welcome me as a well-born man who hates the Baglioni and knows their defences and resources; we shall lay plots, until I come again and take Perugia into my hand and give it to Duke Valentino for his share, reserving only the Princess Ottavia for my own. Yes, and I shall not be unmindful of your interest, my Raffaello." Then, brandishing his sword, he strutted about the little attic, giving orders for battles, executions, and festivities to clouds of imaginary soldiers,

retainers, and menials. Suddenly he sank upon a stool, elbow on knee, chin in hand, his brow seamed with wrinkles of profound thought.

"Ah! my sweet brother, the exiled Duke of Urbino, is welcome at our court," he said, bending his eyes upon Raffaello, who had watched his extravagances with a little contempt, more surprise, and, finally, with something of amusement. "We have considered your petition and have determined to restore you to your duchy. Will you have the usurper, Guidobaldo, slain? or will you imprison him and wed his daughter? I will grant you your choice, though I beg you to be

merciful, for this same Guidobaldo has deserved well of art — ”

“A truce with nonsense!” interrupted Raffaello, laughing. “It is nearly day and I would sleep.”

“Ah! brother, then you are indeed a philosopher and I love you the more,” cried Ercole. “Minions! harken to the wisdom of the good Duke Raffaello and learn from him moderation. Having the choice of all boons, he selects sleep. Out of our presence — all of you! Methinks I too will join him;” and Ercole, putting aside his outer garments, lay down with much dignity upon his strawpallet. “Brother, the Prince of Perugia is going to visit his bride, the Princess Ottavia.

Your Magnificence may consult your wishes — so they be silent ones."

And Raffaello laughed and followed his friend's example.

Then came a day of terror and disorganization: men lay close in their houses and whispered tales of the great treason, and how the falcons had been stooped upon by their own brood. There was old Filippo da Braccio, lording it uneasily, and Carlo Barciglia Baglioni, and the ruffian, Jeronimo della Penna, and the Corgnas, with the young Grifonetto at their head, and the Lord of Camarino in the background plotting and instigating the whole. These were the powers of the moment, but where was the

power that was to be? Gianpaolo had escaped. Soon he would return with others of his house: Gentile, Adriano Morgante, Marcantonio from the baths at Naples, Troilo from Marsciano. Then, what would become of feeble conspirators without the mind or the credit to organize rebellion into government?

Thus whispered the citizens in their places of retirement, and thus muttered the assassins and bravoes now that their lust of blood was cooled in its gratification, and they knew indeed what they had done and what others would do. One by one they hid away or, slipping out of Perugia, fled, until the time when Gianpaolo came back under

the banner of the golden bar, with the men of Spello and Marsciano and Bastia riding in his train; and Grifonetto went out alone and met him near to the Hospital of the Misericordia, and Gianpaolo, having pointed his sword at the throat of the noble youth, turned from him, saying: "Art thou here, Grifonetto? Farewell with God's peace: I will not slay thee, nor plunge my hand in my own blood, as thou hast done in thine." Then the men-at-arms ran him through, and he lay stark, slender, beautiful, a wonder to all who saw; and Gianpaolo rode on through Perugia and slew right and left — even to the altar of the Duomo, until its steps



Madonna and Saints of Luca Signorelli in the Duomo

ran blood, and the blessed Madonna of Luca Signorelli wept tears of horror from where she sat with Saint John and Saint, Onuphrius and Saint Stephen.

So the gentle prince, Gianpaolo Baglioni, took away the corpses, and washed the altar and the aisles and the steps with wine, and held a new service of consecration in the Duomo, and draped his salons and dressed his retainers in black, while everywhere upon the palazzo were hanging the heads of traitors, and their portraits and arms reversed on little shields. Thus the Baglioni returned to Perugia.

XVI

HIS MAGNIFICENCE HAS HIS JEST

THROUGH all these days Raffaello and Ercole had lain quiet in their lodgings, sallying forth only for food. At first the latter had been full of impossible plans and plots, but when he learned that the Lady Ottavia was safe, though closely guarded, he listened to his friend's prayers, humoring his whim that he would stand stronger when Gianpaolo had proven ungrateful — provided always princely ingratitude should not reach the point of murder as a guerdon for benefit received. These chances they debated many times, ready to hazard the one for the profit of the

other, and, meanwhile, they waited the outcome.

One day — it was in mid-August, and they had arisen early; the city was quiet once more, and it began to appear as if there had fallen upon Ercole what was for him the worst of all fates: that of being forgotten. A woman, she with whom they lodged, came weeping and trembling to their door, and behind her upon the stairs was the sound of many feet and the striking of scabbard-tips against the walls.

Raffaello listened closely with bent head; but Ercole, with a sigh of relief, threw open the door and stepped out, smiling.

An officer, fully armed, stood upon

the landing, blinking in the sudden light of the opened door.

"It is Messer Ercole da Passigno?" he said.

Ercole bowed.

"The high and mighty prince, Gianpaolo Baglioni, commands your attendance."

"I am ready," said Ercole.

Raffaello pushed forward.

"And I also — his friend," he said.

"The command is but for one," replied the captain, stiffly. "He does well who goes not unbidden into the presence of the Baglioni."

"But surely you will not deny me — "

The officer interrupted:

"What evil have you done me that I should seek your death? Remain here or go elsewhere — if you are indeed his friend: so I may not in mercy stab you on your threshold, and the saints pardon me my sins for that one act of kindliness."

Raffaello stood back with tears starting into his eyes; but Ercole, descending the stairs amid his captors, waved his hand to him and laughed.

Down, out into the street, and up toward the piazza they hurried. Here and there a citizen passed with averted face, fearing doubtless lest he might be recognized by this new victim and involved by a claim for aid or service. Then the palazzo

loomed into view, horrible with its ghastly trophies, and they passed through the gateway, while the lion and the griffin glared from their marble brackets, malignant and bloodthirsty.

On through silent chambers draped with black velvet hangings, where sombre-clad servitors bowed in silence, and threw open doors that led still deeper into the massive pile.

The company had fallen away, man by man, during their passage, and when at last Ercole stood before an oaken door studded with bronze nails, his only attendants were the captain and one other. The prisoner's sword had been left to him through all these happenings, but



The Entrance of the Palazzo Publico

now the officer bent down and drawing it from its sheath handed it to the soldier. Then he knocked gently on the door and it fell open at his touch.

It was a small room, square, but with high ceiling; at a table at one side sat a friar writing, while in a great carven Gothic chair opposite the door reclined a man dressed from head to foot in black velvet without ornament or jewels. The light was none too strong, and his face was half covered by his hand as he leaned forward upon one elbow, but Ercole felt the presence even before he raised his eyes. He knew that the beauty of the most graceful and most savage of beasts

was there; that Gianpaolo had indeed summoned him to a last interview.

A momentary chill struck to his heart like a dagger-thrust, and then he grew cool and collected under the spur of the unequal contest, and all other feeling was drowned in a high resolve to bear himself so that his last hours should leave behind them no memory whereat friends could blush or enemies exult.

Doffing his little red cap, he bowed with graceful dignity, and, standing erect, he looked full at Gianpaolo and waited.

It was the latter's eyes, deep sunken within blue rings and burning with half-smothered fires, that

wandered, searching but restless, over every inch of the slender, well-knit youth before him. Then he motioned to the soldiers, who bowed and withdrew, closing the door behind them. And now the eyes were turned upon the monkish secretary until he seemed to writhe under them and half rose from his table, but Gianpaolo shook his head, and the monk sank back into his seat, pale and exhausted.

How many death sentences had he heard and transcribed during the last few days? thought Ercole, and he glanced at him pityingly; but the eyes of Gianpaolo were again regarding himself, and he felt their power and met them — just a little

indignant at the unnecessary and painful suspense to which he was being subjected.

At last the Baglioni spoke:

"It is Messer Ercole da Passigno, pupil in painting of Pietro Vannucci, named 'The Perugian'?"

Ercole bowed.

"Son of Antonio, the merchant, and grandson of Messer Fabrizio da Passigno, sometime lieutenant of condottieri in the service of Francesco Sforza?" continued Gianpaolo.

Again Ercole inclined his head in acquiescence.

"You are a poor man, and, though of blood accounted gentle, you have yet neither land nor tower nor servant —"

"Because my father, being honest, thought proper to discharge debts not justly his, and died before such time — " began Ercole, but Gianpaolo interrupted :

"The cause is for you ; the fact for me," and Ercole was silent.

After a moment the inquisitor spoke again :

"Being such and of such fortunes, you have yet aspired to love the daughter of Gianpaolo Baglioni."

Ercole stood very straight, his eyes grew warm and luminous with the fires that burned deep in his soul, and he answered firmly :

"It is true ; and if it be aspiration unto death to love her, I account it wiser than the meanness of heart

that, having once seen such loveliness, could look with patience upon a life that might behold it no more."

Gianpaolo's face was impenetrable.

"That you alone had loved would be matter of little moment," he said. "That she also has looked upon you with foolish eyes, renders urgent my duty as a father and a prince."

Ercole sank upon one knee, as if from very weakness; he clasped his hands; all his composure was gone.

"You have spoken words," he said, slowly, "that are more certain consolation to a dying man than was the vision of eternal joy to God's martyrs."

"Perhaps I owe you that much," said Gianpaolo, looking down to hide the cloud that mantled his brow. "I might give you safe-conduct out of all my estates," he went on, as if to himself, "taking your parole that you should not return —"

Ercole sprang to his feet, laughing.

"Nay, rather call them now to kill me," he cried. "Now, while the wine of your words is in my heart; that I may die blessing God."

"I could not trust your parole," continued Gianpaolo, as if there had been no interruption.

"Therefore, I would not give it you," said Ercole.

Gianpaolo started slightly, and, for

a moment, he said nothing. His face had become very thoughtful.

"I owe you something of a debt," he said at last.

"Think not of it," cried Ercole. "It is one that no prince measures."

He was filled now with a recklessness that seemed bent upon hastening the end which he felt hung over him; but not so much as the quiver of an eyelid told that the other had heard, much less taken umbrage at such boldness. Gianpaolo's voice was even more gentle when he spoke again.

"You speak wisely. How shall the Lord of Perugia pay the debt of the man, Gianpaolo Baglioni — out of the duty a prince owes to his

place and people? Listen. It is by the marriage of women that a ruler fortifies his power. We of the Baglioni are strong in Umbria, but Ottavia must add to that strength. He who weds her must bring to our aid lofty towers, broad lands, noble blood, well-followed banners; or, in default of these," and the speaker paused, "he must bring such strength of mind or body as shall weigh down the scale. All who would thwart me must be swept relentlessly from my path — even though I love them as sons. Nothing shall hinder my policy — nothing!" For a moment his eyes blazed with ambition; perhaps, even, with something of patriotism.

Then they grew calm again. "Can you give me these things?" he said; "or can you make good their lack?"

Ercole shrugged his shoulders and his lip curled. It was child's play, this questioning: worse, it was the play of the cat with the mouse, and he was weary.

"Bethink you well, lest you decry your merit," said Gianpaolo.

"I have at least the merit to die well for a great love."

"So died Christ's saints and martyrs now in Heaven," replied Gianpaolo; "but they, also, were workers of miracles. He who works miracles in these days is greatest of men. Bethink you; are you of his company?"

Ercole leaned forward, white with rage.

"Truly, I think you are prince of the company of devils."

Gianpaolo threw back his head and laughed out, and the secretary looked up in sudden terror.

"You have said it!" cried the Lord of Perugia. "Has not the whole of Italy so named us of the Baglioni? — devils? — of a race sprung from the loins of the king of devils? Is it not from this blood that I have, with my own eyes, beheld you lead forth a choir of angels? What miracle greater than to make an angel of a Baglioni? What miracle-worker more potent? How shall I strengthen

my house better than by such an alliance?"

He rose and drew aside a curtain that hung beside his chair, disclosing a dimly lighted passage.

"Hasten, signor," he said. "It is there that your mistress awaits you."

Ercole bowed deeply and advanced, smiling and with a firm step. Was it cord, axe, or poniard that lurked in the passage? And Gianpaolo watched him pass, wondering beneath his mood at the light in the boy's eyes.

Suddenly Ercole saw the darkness brighten. He had thrust aside another curtain and stepped out into a room beyond,—and lo! he was dead and in Paradise.

She sat before him, slender, lithe,

demure, in a great carven Gothic chair, a small volume in her lap and a spaniel curled up at her feet. A cloud of hair, half loosed from its net of pearls and golden with the purest tint of the Etruscan refiners, floated across her neck and cheek, while the gown of blue silk, broad sleeved, through whose slashes the white of the vest seemed ready to burst, trailed gracefully to the floor. She looked at Ercole, and her eyes seemed now green, now gray, now golden, in their strange light.

He had fallen upon both knees, stretching out his arms as to a saint above an altar.

"If you come nearer you may kiss my hand," she said.

There was an odor of flowers, and from some far-off chamber of the palazzo came whispering the divine harmony of lutes and viols : behind him the curtain through which he had just passed trembled and fell aside, disclosing a face, kindly, mild, gentle, yet with features that bore all the terrible beauty of Gianpaolo Baglioni.

The eyes of Ercole da Passigno saw nothing, and his ears heard not — only his soul knew all things ; for the Princess Ottavia had kissed him upon the mouth.



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